Paul Bacon, Hartmut Meyer and Hidetoshi Nakamura (eds.),
The European Union and Japan. A New Chapter in Civilian Power Cooperation?

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EU-Japan civilian power cooperation is unspectacular. As opposed to the age of bilateral trade disputes, which ended when the Japanese bubble burst in 1990 and when China emerged as a new competitor, it does not generate front page headlines. However, the significant contribution it makes to global governance is important. This fact-filled volume proves that lofty, bilateral summit statement declarations are not just diplomatic niceties, rather they are followed up with much more substance than meets the public eye.

Hartmut Meyer spells out ten different scenarios of world order, including unipolar, bipolar, tripolar and global chaos. Meyer uses these theories to analyse the importance of EU-Japan relations, ranging from very meaningful to peripheral and more or less irrelevant. With the US’, Europe’s and Japan’s global role in relative decline (p. 5), Meyer suggests the international environment has become increasingly inclined towards the conduct of bilateral relations. In a unipolar economic world dominated by the US, the shots were clearly called in Washington D.C. However, the author suggests that in a multipolar world with emerging Powers, a central role for the EU and Japan would be to protect existing norms such as free trade, non-proliferation, or the invulnerability of borders. In a G2 world of intense US-China rivalry, Japan would take sides, but the EU in all likelihood would be very hesitant to do so and bilateral relations would therefore suffer. Meyer posits a further scenario, the emergence of regionally integrated groupings along the EU’s preferred vision of world order, in which Japan in turn has no interest in fearing Chinese domination. Finally, we are shown a less attractive scenario in which declining state power and clashes of cultures, lead to asymmetric warfare and a chaotic world dis-order: here there would be little scope for meaningful cooperation. While the EU insists on its role as a normative civil Power with global responsibilities, Japan is less assertive, with its quick turnover of governments and insular nation state outlook. Yet the self-congratulatory and self-referential annual summit statements (p. 9), do not hide the loss of relative power by both sides and an erosion of normative and ethical influence.

Hidetoshi Nakamura describes the long way from the 1991 Joint Declaration, when peace was declared in EU-Japan relations, to the opening of Free Trade
Agreement (FTA) negotiations in March 2013. He notes that, curiously, the two post-war PMs who were most friendly towards Europe, Tsutomu Hata (1994) and Yukio Hatoyama (2009/10) missed scheduled EU-Japan bilateral summits, because their tenure lasted only a few months (p. 25).

Mario Telo asks why the EU, counting for 30% of the world’s GDP and 20% of world trade, a normative civilian Power with instruments ranging from trade agreements and aid provision, to sanctions and embargoes, is threatened by internal fragmentation and external irrelevance? It barely impacts on its neighbours Turkey, Armenia, Egypt and Israel, and struggles in its relations with failed states such as Libya or Syria. Its concept of strategic partners is ill defined (p. 47). Only few among the ten of these strategic partners share the EU’s values or security interests. Indeed, despite contributing 55% of the UN’s budget, the influence of the EU and its Member States is often imperceptible. Telo seeks to explain this by suggesting that as that the losers of the Second World War, the defeated parties in various colonial wars and past victims of Communist rule, the Member States of the EU now want to keep a low global profile. One may disagree with his diagnosis of German hegemony in the EU’s foreign policies – there are too many blockages for any “hegemon” in the works, but nonetheless, his suggestion that the EU will remain a civilian Power (p. 49), and thus retain its marginal status rings true.

Paul Bacon and Martin Holland review the results of a content analysis of Japanese media (Nikkei, Yomiuri and the Japan Times) during 2010/12, followed by elite interviews on the Japanese perception of the EU. The survey is methodologically robust with one important exception: the Japan Times has a print run of 50,000 and is aimed at foreign readers, and therefore has no influence on public opinion in Japan. The Yomiuri in contrast has 8 million readers. Drawing comparison between the two is therefore methodologically weak. However, despite this, the authors find reasonable visibility and a largely positive EU image, identified with human rights, democracy and stable trade relations. Even Baroness Catherine Ashton got good press (p. 59). What is ignored in the survey is that Europe is still seen by almost all Japanese in terms of the larger Member States, on which they hold strong views and maintain usually very positive, if sometimes slightly dated stereotypes.

Min Shu, in an equally knowledgeable article, analyses EU trade policy responses to its rapidly growing trade deficit with East Asia, ($ 260 billion in 2012) and to the persistent failure to conclude the Doha round. In 2006, the EU concluded FTAs and engaged with a “Global Europe” reform of the common commercial policy, which focussed on emerging markets, and ignored Japan (p. 73). First FTAs were concluded with Korea in 2010 and with Singapore in 2012, with talks well underway with Vietnam, Thailand and Malaysia, thus giving up the erstwhile preference for an ASEAN wide deal. On anti-dumping duties against Chinese made shoes, light bulbs and solar panels Member States predictably voted depending on their sectoral economic interests (p. 71), and on how severe the impact of a Chinese wine retaliation would be (p. 79). Indeed, in spite of all value driven Chinese Communist Party (CCP) reform, nothing new.

Frederic Ponjaert gives a very useful background to the opening of the FTA talks. Yet there are caveats which are not central to his reasoning and rosy views on “Abenomics” abound. The author argues that these talks seek enhanced competitiveness through structural reforms. However, it would be a useful addition to know which ones are not just announced, but actually implemented. A useful
overview of growth agendas between the EU and Japan overlooked the fact that the monetary policies of the Bank of Japan (BoJ) and the European Central Bank have become almost identical in terms of quantitative and qualitative easing. Moreover, he acknowledges that the European semester (the Commission’s review of member states’ spending policies being in line with macroeconomic forecasts and structural policy objectives), which requires slightly restrictive fiscal policies is a fairly toothless paper tiger. It is true that European fiscal policies are not as irresponsible as those of Japan’s LDP governments, but to term them as ‘austerity’ and ‘restrictive’ is beyond reason with public deficits and tax burdens expanding. Equally it seems audacious to claim that Japan achieves ‘welfare efficiency’ with public expenditure for medical and old age care spinning out of control and when pensioners benefit largely from social spending at the expense of child care. If Japan is to achieve long term deficit reduction through tax increases as suggested by Ponjaert (p. 89), it would require an increase of between 30% and 40%, a scenario that has to be classed as unlikely.

The background to the ‘scoping exercise’ which preceded the start of the FTA talks in 2011, is well explained. It is often overlooked that the decision was made soon after the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, when all EU countries were keen to help and were more open to Japanese lobbying, which had previously been unsuccessful. As a further comment to the author’s factual narrative, it appears that the EU’s doctrinaire linkage of trade concessions to a human rights clause in all its trade agreements (in large part due to the EP’s insistence) is a distraction from more relevant Non Tariff Barriers (NTBs), public procurement and tariff issues. These would require calibrated political pressure, including targeted public pronouncements ‘gaiatsu’ to force protectionist line ministries’ hands and to generate political deals in Japan in time to compensate vested interests for the necessary compromises. Curiously, this is not done by the EU in the current talks, indeed EU requests remain closely guarded secrets. Consequently EU-Japan FTA talks are put on a political backburner in Tokyo, with few Japanese concessions in the pipeline at the time of writing in August 2015, and the Transpacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations, though politically more charged and substantially more complicated, clearly enjoying political precedence. The constructive positions of Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) and the problems encountered by the continuous changes in their negotiating teams (p. 100) are well explained by Ponjaert, but the theme of the endemic resistance of line ministries defending their client industries remains underdeveloped. This is at the centre of the painfully slow progress. Theoretically, the PM’s office could push things through, as the President has done in Korea, however, this has not been the case in Japan, where the LDP continues to resemble a factional coalition of sorts. Hence it is surprising to find that the Cabinet Office played a “proactive role” (p. 111) in these talks. If this is the case, it was done without informing Prime Minister Abe prior to the 2015 summit.

In a following chapter, Gijs Berends examines whether common food norms have emerged after decades of bilateral negotiations over food safety standards, expert cooperation in the relevant international bodies and more or less shared crisis management over BSE and radioactive contamination. He suggests that the record remains mixed: Japan is a net food importer with high production costs and protectionist agricultural policies. Indeed, he notes that Japan is not interested in food exports and international norms, and sets her own standards with domestic
interests in mind foremost. Hence Japan complains bitterly about Fukushima (2011) related foreign restrictions, while maintaining controls over Chernobyl (1986) affected imports thirty years on. Another fundamental difference exists in terms of food safety philosophies: in Japan, food additives are prohibited unless specifically allowed: creating what is known as ‘positive list’ regulation. In the EU the opposite is true: additives are permitted until expressly forbidden creating ‘negative list’ regulation. Berends’ chapter makes fascinating reading on the management of the post-Fukushima Japanese food crisis, which he experienced first-hand in Tokyo. At first everything was classed as safe (apart from a few exceptions), later stricter controls and standards were applied and all products were subsequently considered safer than safe.

Miranda Schreuers reviews mutual learning and exchanges of environmental technologies between Europe and Japan since the Meiji days when European hygiene concepts, like sewage treatment and water filters were introduced to Japan to combat recurrent cholera epidemics (p. 136). Equally the notion of conservationist societies was imported in the interwar years, whilst contemporary attempts to copy Green Parties in Japan failed (p. 138). Environmental Agencies – later upgraded to ministries – were set up by both sides in the 1970s, reflecting growing problem awareness and health concerns. Japan’s early attempts at pollution control, reducing sulphur emissions and acid rain, caused interest in Europe as did Japan’s ingenious ‘top runner’ programme of upgrading the energy efficiency of electrical goods by setting the best performers’ standards as future norms (p.140). Equally shared was the collective hysteria over nuclear safety after Fukushima (an overaged, thoughtlessly built Westinghouse design with no serious crisis management foreseen by its operator TEPCO) in some, but not all EU countries (pp. 142–3). This was followed by shared experiences on renewables, including the problematic ones with market distorting over-high, feed-in-prices (p. 145).

Bart Gaens and Henri Vogt cover development aid cooperation. The authors note that both Japan and the EU subscribe to the lofty aims of the Millennium goals and human security, the EU more noisily than Japan, but continue to pursue their distinct self-interests at the same time (p. 151). And, the authors note, within the EU, larger donors such as France, Germany and the UK do the same: this leads to a situation some term incoherence, and others term “complementarity” (p. 153). This also applies to EU-Japan (non-)cooperation. Japan has self-interested preference for loans over grants; for economic infrastructure development in the transport, communication and energy sectors in Asian middle income countries; and for bolstering (anti-Chinese) security interests in the Philippines, Vietnam, and Sri Lanka etc. Only under Western pressure notably in the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC) does Japan adopt a broader human development perspective. The EU, in contrast, donates money to NGOs and UN agencies, and has been noted to make budget transfers corrupt regimes.

Hiroshi Ohta and Yves Tiberghien recount the EU and Japan’s efforts to save the Kyoto Protocol by co-opting Russia in exchange for promises of WTO membership (p. 170). At later conferences, both faced a rejection by the BRICs plus the USA, with the US and China alone accounting for 43% of global emissions compared to Japan and the EU’s 18%. Given the statistics and its own lack of interest in implementation, Japan abandoned ship. This left the EU in an isolated diplomatic position “hoping to name and shame other major countries into action” (p. 171). With Japan’s almost,
but not yet final, exit from nuclear energy after Fukushima not even the half hearted “embedded symbolism” (p. 174) of Kyoto will revive this erstwhile failed alliance.

Paul Bacon, in one of the most fascinating chapters of the volume, examines the EU’s doctrinal and one dimensional view of the death penalty in Japan and thoughtfully argues for a more differentiated localised approach to promote criminal justice reform. He suggests that instead of a one-size-fits-all approach it would be more sensible to work with human rights defenders to promote the right to legal aid from the moment of arrest and throughout the interrogation process. Additionally, he notes that questioning should be video recorded to prevent false confessions under torture and duress (which is still the norm in Japan).

Dimitar Bechev notes in his chapter that during the civil wars in the Balkans (1991–99), solutions were heavily dependent on US hard power. EU soft power failed spectacularly. Yet for post-conflict resolution, the EU, as with the rest of Central Eastern Europe, became an anchor for political and economic transformation. Japan’s role in the region was, and remains, modest, constructive and multilateral. Japan’s Official Development Aid (ODA) went for infrastructural projects in Romania and Bulgaria, while her Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) went for better governed Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic to join German centred supply and manufacturing chains (p. 208). As elsewhere, Japan wisely prefers public authorities as partners (not NGOs) and remains politically neutral (unlike the EU).

Edited volumes often fail to make comfortable bedside reading: many are poorly edited conference proceedings which should better have remained unpublished. This carefully drafted volume is an exception. Though most of the Japanese authors are from the University of Waseda, it is a very balanced and well informed attempt to shed light into a very significant and constantly evolving bilateral relationship which remains curiously under-researched and under-reported, although the partners account for one third of the world’s GDP. Obviously trying to save the Kyoto Protocol and the Biodiversity Convention or setting up joint food standards generates less headlines than smacking Anti-Dumping Duties (ADDs) on leather shoes or light bulbs. Worse, the constructive substance of bilateral relations is obscured by opaque PR on both sides, with summit press statements running to twenty seven pages of all-inclusive lists of good intentions which in their bureaucratic politically correct verbosity obscure rather than illuminate, and leave even well-meaning observers puzzled about substance and priorities. So, in sum, this well researched volume is uniquely placed and a worthwhile, timely and instructive read not only for serious academics but hopefully also for practitioners, policy makers and journalists covering these relations.