

Rethinking the “Gold Standard”: The EU and Strategic Alliances with Japan and India



by Francesco Paolo Cioffo

- The partnership with Japan is often presented by the EU as a model.
- However, the EU-Japan partnership reflects the specific conditions of cooperation between economically advanced and geopolitically aligned parties. In addition, its high level of institutionalisation cannot be easily replicated.
- The EU’s partnership with India illustrates how more modular and sector-specific forms of cooperation better support the EU’s long-term strategic objectives when engaging emerging powers.

The EU frequently presents its partnership with Japan as one of the most effective **examples** of its diplomatic engagement in Asia. The relationship is structured upon the **EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement** and the **EU-Japan Strategic Partnership Agreement**, and it is supported by a dense network of institutional mechanisms covering trade, regulatory cooperation, digital policy, environmental issues and security dialogue. This treaty-based framework provides a high degree of stability and facilitates coordination across multiple sectors, including industrial goods, digital standards and connectivity initiatives.

The effectiveness of the EU-Japan partnership is closely linked to the structural characteristics of the two actors: both are advanced economies with relatively similar regulatory systems and



a shared interest in maintaining a rules-based international order. Their economic models are compatible, as both rely on export-oriented growth, strong industrial sectors and deep integration into global value chains, particularly in manufacturing and technology-intensive industries. Their geopolitical preferences also overlap to a significant extent, as illustrated by their coordination in forums such as the G7 and their shared positions on trade governance and Indo-Pacific security. As well as their complex relationship with China as both major economic partner and geopolitical rival.

India's position in the international system differs from that of Japan in several respects

The level of institutionalisation that characterises the EU-Japan relationship contributes to its stability, but it also shapes the type of outcomes it can produce. Because cooperation is already highly developed, additional initiatives tend to extend or refine existing areas of engagement rather than create new forms of strategic interaction. For example, recent cooperation has focused on incremental developments such as the **EU-Japan Digital Partnership** and coordination on supply chain resilience. The partnership remains important for maintaining coordination across multiple policy hotspots, but its capacity to generate new strategic opportunities is more limited. This is particularly relevant in the context of broader changes in the international system, including increasing US-China competition, the growing role of middle powers and the fragmentation of global governance structures.

The EU-India relationship and structural differences

The differences between the EU-Japan partnership and the EU-India relationship illustrate the limits of applying a single model to

diverse partners.

EU-India relations have often been described as insufficiently developed, particularly following the long stagnation of trade negotiations prior to 2022. However, this comparison does not fully account for the structural differences between the two cases.

India's position in the international system differs from that of Japan in several respects. First, it is a rising power with a strong emphasis on strategic autonomy and a foreign policy that prioritises flexibility in its external relations, as reflected in its participation in frameworks such as BRICS, the Quad and the G20. Second, its economic model combines liberalisation with selective protection, particularly in sectors such as agriculture, digital markets and manufacturing. These factors affect both the scope and the form of cooperation that can be achieved, making a highly institutionalised and treaty-based framework (like Japan) more difficult to establish, especially when it requires extensive regulatory convergence.

Recent developments suggest that EU-India relations are nonetheless evolving in a more substantive direction. Following the relaunch of negotiations in 2022, discussions progressed toward the signing of a **comprehensive security and defence partnership** and the **free trade agreement** in 2026, although ratification and implementation remain subject to further political processes. The negotiations required compromises in several sensitive areas. For instance, disagreements over tariffs on automobiles and agricultural products, as well as **debates over the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism**, regulatory standards in digital trade and others, led to strategic compromises and evasions rather than full synchronisation. These dynamics reflect the complexity of aligning two large and diverse economies and confirm the necessity to move beyond rigid frameworks and towards more **modular** ones.



Flexibility in the new World order

In this context, the relatively limited level of institutionalisation in the EU-India relationship can be interpreted with more nuance. While it may appear incomplete when measured against the EU-Japan framework, it also allows for a form of cooperation that is less constrained by formal structures. This can facilitate engagement in areas where interests converge without requiring comprehensive alignment across all policy domains. As already mentioned, this came in handy recently when the EU, swayed by US President Donald Trump unpredictability, sought to close the “mother of all deals” with New Delhi after so many years of delays.

This is particularly relevant in sectors such as digital governance, energy, green transition, infrastructure development and supply chain resilience. For example, EU-India cooperation through the **Trade and Technology Council** and connectivity initiatives under the **Global Gateway strategy**, shows how sector-specific engagement can advance shared objectives without requiring full regulatory convergence. A more flexible framework makes it possible to develop cooperation incrementally, without linking progress in one sector to outcomes in others. Thus, reducing the risk of delays associated with large-scale negotiations.

Flexibility also has implications for the EU's broader strategic positioning. The international system is increasingly characterised by fragmentation and multipolarity. In this environment, partnerships that allow for more flexible forms of cooperation may provide greater adaptability than those based on more comprehensive, but rigid, coalition. The EU-Japan partnership contributes to coordination among actors that are already closely aligned, but it does not significantly alter the structure of the international system. Engagement with India, by contrast, enables the EU to interact with a major actor that maintains a degree of independence from established power blocs and plays an increasingly important role in shaping

global economic and political dynamics.

Engagement with India enables the EU to interact with a major actor that maintains a degree of independence from established power blocs

Developing a more substantial partnership with India would therefore have implications beyond bilateral cooperation. It would expand the EU's external options and support its efforts to operate in a more multipolar environment. This does not require abandoning institutional approaches altogether, but it does suggest that the EU may need to apply different modular forms of engagement in more scenarios involving emerging powers (the BRICS for instance).

The partnership between India and Japan provides a useful reference point for understanding modular forms of cooperation with emerging powers. Unlike the EU-Japan relationship, it is not based on deep regulatory convergence or a highly institutionalised legal framework, but on a combination of **strategic coordination and sector-specific initiatives**. The relationship has developed through mechanisms such as the Special Strategic and Global Partnership and regular high-level dialogues, as well as cooperation in areas including **infrastructure development, connectivity and security**. This approach allows both actors to pursue cooperation in areas of mutual interest while preserving autonomy in others, avoiding the constraints associated with comprehensive institutionalisation.

In conclusion, the India-Japan and the EU-India partnership illustrates how modular, interest-driven cooperation can sustain a substantive strategic relationship without relying on the type of dense legal and regulatory framework that characterises the EU-Japan case.

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