The Strategic Significance of Strengthening Japan-Europe Relations

Research Report

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Executive Summary

Strengthening the partnership between Japan and Europe has become an increasingly urgent priority. Multiple destabilizing factors have converged to create a strategic inflection point; the ongoing situation in Iran and the energy crisis it has triggered, friction between the United States and Europe, China's weaponization of economic relations, and the growing recognition of the inseparability of European and Indo-Pacific security. Against this backdrop, European leaders made a succession of visits to Japan between January and April 2026, further strengthening bilateral relations through concrete cooperation via a series of summit meetings and joint statements. This rapid diplomatic momentum underscores a shared recognition that Japan-Europe cooperation fulfills mutually complementary strategic imperatives amidst escalating global instability and pervasive economic coercion.

The Dutch TTF natural gas price, which had remained stable at approximately €30/MWh preceding the U.S.-led strikes on Iran, escalated beyond €60/MWh on 19 March 2026. This price volatility evoked the energy crisis of 2022 and exposed Europe's persistent vulnerability to external supply shocks, notwithstanding its strategic efforts to diversify away from Russian energy. Among these challenges, critical minerals constitute the most acute vulnerability. The green transition, digital transformation, and defense modernization are inherently contingent upon materials characterized by highly concentrated and fragile supply chains. China's hegemony across multiple tiers of the critical minerals value chain—encompassing extraction, processing, and manufacturing—presents systemic risks regarding economic coercion and supply security.

Japan and Europe currently confront a shared constellation of challenges; attaining strategic autonomy without engendering nascent dependencies, upholding and reinforcing the order based on the rule of law, diversifying supply chains, and fostering resilience through collaboration with like-minded partners. This objective is of paramount importance for Europe, which endeavors to realize strategic autonomy while simultaneously sustaining industrial competitiveness. This report offers a comprehensive overview of Japan-Europe relations by analyzing the strategic commonalities underpinning their cooperation and providing a comparative discourse analysis of recent bilateral joint statements.

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1. Introduction: The Turbulent International Order and Japan-Europe Strategic Convergence

The global landscape of 2026 is defined by acute instability and burgeoning fragmentation. For Japan and Europe, whose partnership transcends geographical distance through shared values, such systemic turbulence is driving an unprecedented intensification of strategic engagement. This cooperation is predicated on common democratic values, the preservation of the order based on the rule of law, and the burgeoning consensus regarding the indivisibility of security across Europe and Indo-Pacific regions.

Several destabilizing factors are converging to catalyze this strategic alignment. First, the concept of "European strategic autonomy"—originally conceived within the framework of defense and security—has broadened to encompass economic security, technological sovereignty, and energy resilience. As Demertzis et al. (2025, p. 9) observe, "...the increase in the security threats to the EU has exposed its defence dependencies. (...) Military and economic security are now the two most important objectives to be pursued first so that the EU can regain the freedom to design its policies and pursue its goals". Russia's aggression against Ukraine exposed Europe's precarious reliance on an authoritarian energy supplier, while the subsequent energy crisis underscored the constraints on the EU's capacity for independent action. The situation in Iran from late February 2026 onward, coupled with friction with the United States, has further exacerbated these systemic vulnerabilities.

Second, energy security has emerged as a critical nexus linking geopolitical stability, economic prosperity, and climate action goals. According to the International Energy Agency, approximately 20 million barrels of crude oil per day transit the Strait of Hormuz—accounting for around 25% of global seaborne oil trade—and the effective closure of this strait has caused one of the largest oil supply disruptions in history. While Europe's dependence on the Middle East for natural gas is comparatively limited, it faces intensifying competition in global markets, and European gas prices have risen sharply. The Dutch TTF natural gas price, which had been stable at approximately €30/MWh prior to the U.S.-led strikes on Iran, surged past €60/MWh on 19 March 2026, recalling the energy crisis of 2022 and exposing Europe's continued vulnerability to external supply disruptions despite its diversification efforts aimed at reducing dependence on Russian energy.

Third, the challenge of securing critical minerals has become a central pillar of economic security strategy for both Europe and Japan. Critical raw materials, including lithium, cobalt, magnesium, and other rare earth elements—the supply of which is disproportionately dominated by China—are indispensable for both the green transition and digital transformation. China currently supplies 100% of the EU's heavy rare earth elements and 97% of its magnesium (European Court of Auditors Special Report, 2026). This concentration of supply creates serious vulnerability to economic pressure, as Japan experienced when China temporarily banned rare earth exports in 2010. The EU Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) establishes ambitious benchmarks for 2030 to enhance the Union's strategic autonomy: domestic extraction should account for at least 10% of the Union's annual consumption of strategic raw materials, with processing and recycling targets stipulated at least 40% and 25%, respectively. Central to this regulation is the diversification of supply, ensuring that 'not more than 65% of the Union's annual consumption of each strategic raw material at any relevant stage of processing' is sourced from a single third country. However, achieving these objectives faces significant challenges, including protracted

permitting processes and constrained near-term recycling capacities (Righetti et al., 2023, p. 73).

Fourth, friction between the United States and Europe has introduced new uncertainty into the transatlantic relationship. While the United States remains Europe's primary security guarantor through NATO, frictions have emerged over disagreements on trade policy, technology regulation, climate action, and approaches to China. Tensions between the Trump administration and Europe have intensified particularly regarding the sovereignty of Greenland and the diplomatic response to Middle Eastern affairs. While these tensions are reinforcing European awareness of the need to strengthen strategic autonomy, they are also highlighting the limits of Europe's independent military capabilities.

Fifth, the inseparability of European and East Asian security is becoming increasingly apparent. China's assertiveness in the East and South China Seas, its pressure on Taiwan, its support for Russia in Ukraine, and the advancement of Russia-North Korea military cooperation have all demonstrated the close linkage between East Asian and European security. This situation is driving both Japan and European nations to expand defense cooperation, intelligence sharing, and joint exercises beyond their respective neighborhoods. Japan's consistent support for Ukraine since Russia's aggression has been of critical importance to the European side, powerfully reinforcing the impression that Japan is a partner sharing the same values and remains committed to the order based on the rule of law. As the joint op-ed by Prime Minister Takaichi and Prime Minister Meloni notes; "In this context, Italy and Japan can play a leading role. We share a responsibility to help shape the future international order. " (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026a).

The series of Japan-Europe summits convened in early 2026—encompassing Italy (16 January), the United Kingdom (31 January), France (1 April), and Poland (15 April)—underscores the strategic urgency and increasing depth of the bilateral partnership. Each engagement produced substantive outcomes across a spectrum of critical areas, including defense cooperation, economic security, emerging technologies, and sociocultural exchanges. The joint statements issued at each juncture signify a transition beyond mere diplomatic rhetoric toward a profound institutionalization of practical cooperation.

This introduction has outlined the turbulent international context driving Japan-Europe strategic convergence. The following sections examine in detail the necessity of European strategic autonomy, analyze the discussions and documents produced through the series of summits from 2026 onward, and assess the strengthening of Japan-Europe relations across specific issue areas.

2. The Necessity of European Strategic Autonomy

2.1 Security and Defense Dimensions

European strategic autonomy in the security and defense domain has evolved from an aspirational concept to an operational objective. Russia's aggression against Ukraine exposed the limits of European military capabilities and the continued reality of dependence on the United States for deterrence and defense. While NATO remains the cornerstone of European security, the Trump administration's frustration with NATO over Greenland and the situation in Iran has strengthened Europe's resolve to build autonomous capabilities for crisis management and defense.

The Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP), a trilateral initiative between Japan, Italy, and the United Kingdom, epitomizes a nascent paradigm in defense cooperation. In a definitive joint statement, Prime Ministers Meloni and Takaichi underscored the project's broader implications;

"The Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP), in which we closely work with the United Kingdom, is far more than an advanced industrial project. GCAP represents an initiative that strengthens our strategic autonomy, contributes to Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security and demonstrates that cooperation among like-minded countries is the most effective response to systemic risks and threats." (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026a). GCAP represents a significant paradigm shift in regional security architectures. By moving away from a traditional reliance on U.S.-led platforms, Japan and its European counterparts are facilitating reciprocal technology transfers and fostering interoperable capabilities. This collaborative framework serves to mitigate unilateral dependencies while bolstering collective deterrence. Furthermore, the joint development of a sixth-generation combat aircraft—a venture of immense military sensitivity—presupposes a profound degree of mutual trust. Consequently, the program signals that the Japan-Europe strategic partnership has attained an unprecedented level of institutional and political depth.

Throughout the summits held in 2026, the strategic significance of Foreign and Defense Ministers' Meeting ("2+2") was consistently underscored as a vital mechanism for deepening security cooperation. Specifically, the Japan-UK summit reaffirmed the commitment to convene a "2+2" meeting within the year, while the Japan-France summit was complemented by a concurrent ministerial session. These institutional frameworks serve to streamline intelligence sharing, joint military exercises, and defense equipment cooperation, thereby enabling practical and coordinated responses to regional contingencies.

For Japan, strategic alignment with European partners yields multifaceted advantages. First, it incentivizes sustained European engagement in the Indo-Pacific and enhances operational interoperability, reflecting the postulate that Europe and Indo-Pacific security are intrinsically linked. Second, such cooperation facilitates access to cutting-edge European defense technologies and industrial bases, specifically in critical domains such as missile defense, cybersecurity, and maritime surveillance. Third, it integrates Japan's security policy into a broader democratic coalition dedicated to the order based on the rule of law, thereby consolidating the normative underpinnings of its defense posture.

2.2 Economic Security: Critical Minerals and Supply Chain Resilience

Economic security has emerged as a central pillar of European strategic autonomy, with critical minerals representing a particularly acute vulnerability. The green transition, digital transformation, and defense modernization all depend on materials whose supply chains are highly concentrated and fragile. China's dominant position across multiple stages of the critical minerals value chain—from extraction and processing to manufacturing—creates systemic risks of economic coercion and supply disruption.

Europe's dependence on China for critical minerals is pronounced. As noted above, dependence on China for rare earths remains high, and these dependencies extend beyond raw materials to processed products and manufactured components. For example, China still accounts for an estimated 89 percent of total rare earth separation capacity, an estimated 90 percent of total metal refining capacity, and approximately 92 percent of global sintered NdFeB magnet (the strongest magnets commercially available) manufacturing—essential for the manufacture of electric vehicles and wind turbines (Smith et al., 2022, p. 25).

Japan faces similar vulnerabilities. As a nation with limited domestic mineral resources, Japan has historically relied on diverse global supply chains. Against this backdrop, China's 2010 rare

earth export ban—related to the Senkaku Islands—highlighted the risks of concentrated dependence. This experience prompted Japan to pursue diversification of supply sources, development of alternative materials, and the building of strategic stockpiles through the Japan Organization for Metals and Energy Security (JOGMEC). The EU's "European Critical Raw Materials Centre" draws on Japan's JOGMEC as a model, and Japan's strategic approach offers important implications for Europe.

The summits held in 2026 consistently emphasized economic security cooperation. At the Japan-Italy summit, both sides "amid growing international concerns over export restrictions including critical minerals, the two leaders concurred on further strengthening cooperation on economic security to enhance supply chain resilience including cooperation regarding critical raw minerals" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026b). Similarly, at the Japan-UK summit, both sides "shared the view that it is imperative to collaborate through the Economic Security Partnership to strengthen the critical minerals supply chains and to work together across like-minded countries as a whole" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026c). At the Japan-France summit, "serious concerns regarding export controls on critical minerals and other materials that could affect global supply chains" were raised, and both sides "concurred on further strengthening strategic cooperation in the field of economic security, including enhancing supply chain resilience for critical minerals" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026d).

The consistency of this language and these commitments across multiple bilateral relationships reflects a shared strategic assessment; economic security through supply chain resilience is not merely a technical challenge but a fundamental requirement for maintaining sovereignty and prosperity in an era of geoeconomic competition. As Zhou et al. (2024, p. 1) note, both Japan and the EU have adopted risk-mitigation measures in their economic relations with China, driven by security and geoeconomic concerns about dependence, focusing on supply chains, technology transfers, and investment in order to reduce risks and strengthen resilience.

The following considerations are important as Japan and Europe advance their economic security policies in the critical minerals domain:

- **De-risking through diversification:**
  Both Japan and Europe are pursuing partnerships with resource-rich countries to reduce dependence on a single supplier. The challenge is to ensure that diversification efforts genuinely build resilient multi-source supply chains, rather than merely shifting dependence from China to other potentially unreliable sources.
- **Mining and processing:**
  The CRMA sets ambitious domestic production targets, as noted above. However, these targets face significant obstacles; permitting processes that can exceed ten years for new mining projects, public opposition on environmental grounds, and the capital-intensive nature of processing facilities—all of which constrain the rapid expansion of domestic production capacity (Righetti et al., 2023, p. 73). Japan faces similar challenges, with limited domestic mineral reserves and strict environmental standards constraining mining possibilities.
- **Recycling and the circular economy:**
  Increasing the recycling rates of critical minerals offers a pathway to reducing import dependence while advancing sustainability goals. However, current recycling infrastructure is inadequate, and many products containing critical minerals are not designed for easy disassembly or material recovery. Building effective recycling systems requires coordinated

efforts across product design, collection systems, and processing technologies—a multi-year undertaking that will not address near-term vulnerabilities (Righetti et al., 2023, p. 72).

2.3 Energy Security: Realities in the Wake of the Russia's Aggression Against Ukraine and the Situation in Iran

Following two successive crises— Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the situation in Iran in 2026—energy security has re-emerged at the forefront of European strategic concerns. These crises exposed the vulnerabilities of Europe's energy supply network and the geopolitical risks inherent in dependence on authoritarian regimes and unstable regions.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the subsequent European sanctions on Russian energy exports forced a rapid and costly restructuring of Europe's energy supply system. Before the war, Russia supplied approximately 45% of the EU's natural gas and 25% of its crude oil (Eurostat, 2023). The sudden loss of these supplies triggered a severe energy crisis in 2022–2023, with gas prices reaching unprecedented levels, prompting governments to implement emergency measures including demand reduction, fuel switching, and massive subsidy programs to protect consumers and industry.

By early 2026, Europe had largely succeeded in replacing Russian pipeline gas with LNG imports from the United States, Qatar, and other suppliers. However, this diversification came at significant cost—both financial and strategic. LNG is more expensive than pipeline gas, leaving European industry facing reduced competitiveness, and the transition exposed Europe to the volatility of global LNG markets. The rapid expansion of LNG import infrastructure has also created new dependencies on specific supplier countries and transit routes.

The joint U.S.-Israeli military strikes on Iran, initiated in late February 2026, precipitated a global energy crisis, which was further exacerbated by pre-existing supply disruptions stemming from the conflict in Ukraine. The effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz necessitated the suspension of approximately 25–30% of global oil flows and 20% of LNG shipments, representing one of the most significant oil supply disruptions in historical record. The resultant impact on European energy markets has been profound; the surge in natural gas prices has permeated the broader economy, escalating costs across power generation, logistics, manufacturing, and residential heating. Although Europe's direct reliance on Middle Eastern imports is relatively circumscribed, the integrated nature of global energy markets compels all importing nations to compete for diminished supplies, thereby inflating prices universally. The manifestation of this crisis varies across European states, contingent upon their specific energy mixes and infrastructural frameworks. While nations heavily dependent on thermal power generation—notably Italy and the United Kingdom—face acute challenges, France and Spain remain comparatively insulated due to their substantial nuclear and renewable energy capacities, respectively. Such divergence hampers a unified European policy response and reinforces the imperative for robust energy solidarity mechanisms.

The successive energy crises have highlighted several lessons for European strategic autonomy. First, diversification of supply sources is necessary but insufficient if all sources remain vulnerable to geopolitical disruption. Second, the transition to renewable energy is essential for meeting climate goals but creates new dependencies on critical minerals and manufacturing capacity concentrated in China. Third, energy security requires not only stable supply but also adequate

storage capacity, flexible demand, and interconnected infrastructure capable of sharing resources across borders.

For example, at the Japan-France summit, these challenges were directly addressed; the two leaders held consultations on the situation in the Middle East, including the current urgent issue in Iran," and "affirmed the importance of ensuring the safety of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz and concurred on continuing close communication toward ensuring the stable supply of critical materials and the early de-escalation of the situation" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026d). This alignment between a major European power and Japan—both significant energy importers—reflects a shared recognition that energy security in an interconnected world requires cooperation among like-minded countries for securing sea lanes, diversifying supply sources, and developing alternative energy systems.

2.4 Industrial Policy and Technological Sovereignty

The pursuit of strategic autonomy has driven the revival of industrial policy in Europe, marking a significant departure from decades of market-oriented approaches. This shift reflects a recognition that certain capabilities—particularly in advanced technology, critical infrastructure, and the defense industry—are too strategically important to be left entirely to market forces or placed under foreign control.

The semiconductor industry illustrates the strategic importance of technological sovereignty. Semiconductors are essential to virtually all modern technologies, from smartphones and automobiles to weapons systems and artificial intelligence. Yet semiconductor supply chains are highly globalized and concentrated, with critical bottlenecks in design, manufacturing equipment, and fabrication. Europe's presence in advanced semiconductor manufacturing is limited, creating vulnerability to supply disruptions and technological dependence. The European Chips Act, adopted in 2023, aims to double Europe's global semiconductor production share to 20% by 2030 through subsidies for manufacturing facilities, support for research and development, and coordination of national policies. However, realizing this objective necessitates substantial capital injection—estimated at over €40 billion in public funding supplemented by even larger private investment—while navigating the competitive landscape of international subsidy regimes. Japan-Europe cooperation in the semiconductor sector offers mutual benefits. Japan possesses world-class capabilities in semiconductor manufacturing equipment and materials, while Europe has strengths in design, specialized applications, and research.

Artificial intelligence has emerged as a critical domain of technological sovereignty, with implications for economic competitiveness, national security, and social governance. The concentration of AI capabilities in a handful of major technology companies—primarily in the United States and China—raises concerns about data privacy, algorithmic bias, and strategic dependence. At the Japan-France summit, reflecting both countries' prioritization of this domain, a separate " Japan France Joint Statement on Cooperation in the field of AI" was adopted (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026d). This statement emphasizes the strategic importance of deepening AI cooperation; strengthening cooperation to promote AI governance frameworks, deepening cooperation on economic security and dual-use technology, promoting linkages between the innovation ecosystems of both countries, and supporting startup matching. As The Japan Times analysis noted, "from cooperating on modular reactors to jointly procuring rare earths and deepening space-defense collaboration, Macron's summit with Takaichi delivered a number of tangible

initiatives spanning artificial intelligence, nuclear energy, economic security and military ties as the two countries took their 'exceptional partnership' to new heights" (Dominguez, 2026).

Nuclear energy is a critical element of both energy security and climate strategy. France, which relies on nuclear power for approximately 70% of its electricity generation, has long been a global leader in nuclear technology. Japan, despite the accident at TEPCO's Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station, has been gradually restarting reactors and investing in next-generation technologies. At the Japan-France summit, the two leaders confirmed that they would "strengthen cooperation in areas such as the development of fast reactors and the promotion of the nuclear fuel cycle as well as in the area of fusion energy" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026d).

Hydrogen is increasingly recognized as essential for decarbonizing sectors where electrification is difficult, including heavy industry, long-distance transport, and seasonal energy storage. Both Europe and Japan have adopted ambitious hydrogen strategies encompassing production capacity, infrastructure development, and international supply chains. Cooperation in the hydrogen sector offers opportunities for technology sharing, joint infrastructure development, and coordination on international standards. Japan's early investment in hydrogen technology and Europe's renewable energy resources create complementarities that can accelerate deployment and reduce costs.

Space capabilities serve both civilian and military purposes and lie at the heart of strategic autonomy. The Japan-France summit "welcomed the broad progress of Japan-France space cooperation and confirmed the importance of private sector cooperation between the two countries" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026d). The integration of space and defense initiatives reflects the pervasive dual-use functionality of modern space-based assets. Such technologies provide multifaceted utility: satellite imagery supports both crisis management and tactical intelligence, while positioning and timing systems underpin both global commerce and high-precision weaponry. This fusion of civilian and military applications makes close coordination between Japan and European partners essential to ensuring interoperability, avoiding duplication, and maximizing collective capabilities. In light of the experience of the Ukraine invasion, strengthening resilience in the satellite and space domain has become a critically important strategic objective.

As this section has shown, the industrial policy and technological sovereignty dimensions of strategic autonomy reflect a fundamental shift in how advanced democracies approach economic and security policy. Rather than relying on market mechanisms and global supply chains to secure critical capabilities, governments are actively shaping industrial development through subsidies, regulation, and international partnerships. While this approach carries risks of inefficiency, protectionism, and market fragmentation, it also offers potential benefits in resilience, innovation, and collective security. The challenge for Japan and Europe is to pursue strategic autonomy in ways that strengthen rather than undermine the order based on the rule of law, cooperating with like-minded countries while remaining as open as possible to broader engagement.

3. Discourse Analysis of the 2026 Japan-Europe Summit Statements

3.1 Italy-Japan "Special Strategic Partnership" (16 January 2026)

The summit between Prime Minister Takaichi and Prime Minister Meloni, held on 16 January 2026, represented a qualitative elevation of the bilateral relationship to a "Special Strategic Partnership." The summit was held on the occasion of this year's 160th anniversary of the

establishment of diplomatic relations between Japan and Italy, providing a symbolic foundation for deepening cooperation. The main points of discussion were as follows:

- The joint statement and summit discussions emphasized several interrelated themes. First, the indivisibility of security across regions: the two leaders "reaffirmed their shared recognition that the security of Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific is strongly interrelated" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026b). This framing positions Japan-Italy cooperation not as a bilateral relationship between two distant countries, but as a contribution to collective security spanning two critical regions.
- Second, defense and security cooperation was prominently featured, with particular emphasis on GCAP. The two leaders "confirmed that they would further enhance partnership in the areas of security and defense, including the joint development of next-generation fighter aircraft by Japan, Italy and the UK, and welcomed ongoing coordination on defense cooperation activities planned for this year" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026a). The joint op-ed by the two Prime Ministers elaborated on GCAP's strategic significance as follows: "The Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP), in which we closely work with the United Kingdom, is far more than an advanced industrial project. The GCAP represents an initiative that strengthens our strategic autonomy, contributes to Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security and demonstrates that cooperation among like-minded countries is the most effective response to systemic risks and threats" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026a).
- Third, economic security and critical minerals were addressed as priority areas. The two leaders expressed their commitment "to collaborating with each other on economic security and resilience under the Action Plan, to mutually support and strengthen their supply chains, including through their industrial systems, and to enhance cooperation regarding critical raw materials" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026b). This language reflects shared concerns about dependence on China and other potentially unreliable suppliers, as well as a commitment to joint risk-mitigation strategies.
- Fourth, advanced technology cooperation spanned a wide range. The two leaders " confirmed their intention to further promote bilateral scientific and technological cooperation in advanced areas such as AI robotics, semiconductors and biomanufacturing, as well as to facilitate the expansion of industrial partnerships, direct investments and trade flows in both directions, especially in high-tech sectors" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026b). This broad framework encompasses infrastructure, transportation, pharmaceuticals, energy, space, semiconductors, and information technology—all of which are critically important for economic competitiveness and strategic autonomy.
- Fifth, values-based cooperation provided the normative foundation. The joint op-ed emphasized that "while geographically distant, we are peoples and nations that share fundamental values rooted in longstanding traditions, which allow us to hold a common vision of society," and that both countries "have chosen "to strengthen bilateral cooperation and to act together on the global stage to defend a free, fair and open international order, in a context marked by instability, strategic competition and revisionist pressures that undermine shared rules" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026a).

The following analytical observations can be derived from the above:

- Several strategic calculations are discernible from the Japan-Italy discussions. For Italy, the partnership with Japan offers an opportunity to enhance its role in the Indo-Pacific, diversify

defense cooperation beyond traditional European and transatlantic frameworks, and access Japanese technology and investment. For Japan, Italy provides a gateway to deeper engagement with the EU and NATO, and access to European defense technologies and markets.

- The emphasis on GCAP is particularly significant. By framing this defense industrial cooperation as "strengthening autonomy" rather than "creating dependence," the discourse positions the Japan-Italy-UK alignment in contrast to traditional defense cooperation models, which often involve asymmetric dependence on major powers.
- The focus on economic security and critical minerals reflects the heightened salience of these issues in the wake of the Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the intensifying U.S.-China technology competition. By explicitly linking economic security to strategic autonomy, the discourse signals that supply chain resilience is not merely an economic concern but a fundamental requirement for sovereignty and security.

3.2 UK-Japan "Enhanced Global Strategic Partner" (January 31, 2026)

The summit between Prime Minister Takaichi and Prime Minister Starmer, held on 31 January 2026, established a "Strategic Cyber Partnership." The summit built on an already robust Japan-UK relationship, including the UK's accession to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and extensive defense cooperation. It is noteworthy that this visit took place during the period of Japan's House of Representatives election campaign. From the UK's perspective, the decision to visit Japan amid the uncertainty of an unpredictable electoral outcome can be assessed as reflecting an intent to strengthen institutionalized state-to-state relations rather than merely building personal trust. From Japan's side as well, inserting a diplomatic engagement in the final period of an election campaign was an unusual step, signaling that Japan places the relationship with the United Kingdom at the highest level of importance. The main points of discussion were as follows:

- First, the summit underscored the indivisibility of security and economic relations across regions. The proceedings highlighted substantive cooperation across both dimensions—notably through the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) and coordination within the CPTPP—and emphasized that the Japan-UK "Enhanced Global Strategic Partnership" serves as a primary symbol of the strategic nexus between Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security.
- Second, cybersecurity was afforded significant prominence, marked by the elevation of bilateral engagement to a "Strategic Cyber Partnership." This development reflects a shared recognition that cyber threats—encompassing state-sponsored espionage, sabotage, and disinformation—constitute critical vulnerabilities that necessitate a synchronized response among like-minded democratic states.
- Third, consistent with the Japan-Italy joint statement, economic security and critical minerals were prioritized. "Amid growing international concerns over disruption of critical minerals, the two leaders shared the view that it is imperative to collaborate through the Economic Security Partnership to strengthen the critical minerals supply chains and to work together across like-minded countries as a whole" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026c).
- Fourth, cooperation in science and technology was notably comprehensive. Both parties "confirmed that science and technology is another promising area of cooperation for Japan and the UK and concurred on holding the Japan-UK Joint Committee Meeting on Science and

Technology Cooperation for the first time in three years, and decided to establish a new space consultation"; furthermore, they "concurred to strengthen partnership on energy and decarbonization such as offshore wind and nuclear, and confirmed their intention to promote joint research and development on Beyond 5G/6G based on the Japan-UK Digital Partnership" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026c). This extensive agenda underscores the diversity of technological domains vital to long-term competitiveness and national security.

- Fifth, the Industrial Strategy Partnership and Economic Security Partnership established a robust overarching framework. Both sides "concurred on elevating Japan-UK cooperation to new heights," "based on the steady progress of cooperation between Japan and the UK," and specifically "concurred to deepen cooperation across a broad range of areas, based on the industrial strategy partnership and the economic security partnership" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026c).

The following analytical observations can be derived from the above:

- The Japan-UK discourse demonstrates a highly comprehensive integration of economic and security dimensions. The Strategic Cyber Partnership signifies a recognition that mitigating cyber threats necessitates sustained, institutionalized cooperation—encompassing intelligence sharing, joint capability development, and synchronized responses to malicious activities. This alignment is of particular strategic significance, given the synergy between the United Kingdom's sophisticated cyber capabilities and Japan's evolving cyber defense capacity.
- Furthermore, the prominence afforded to the Industrial Strategy Partnership alongside the Economic Security Partnership indicates a holistic approach to national competitiveness and resilience. The industrial strategy scope extends beyond the defense sector to include semiconductors, clean energy, and digital technologies—sectors that are increasingly critical to both economic prosperity and national security. By inextricably linking industrial strategy with economic security, the discourse signals that competitiveness and resilience are mutually reinforcing objectives.
- Ultimately, both nations illustrate that middle powers can play a pivotal role in maintaining and strengthening the international order through strategic partnerships, technological innovation, and a steadfast commitment to a rules-based international system.

3.3 France-Japan "Exceptional Partner" (April 1, 2026)

The summit between Prime Minister Takaichi and President Macron, held on 1 April 2026, further strengthened the bilateral relationship as "Exceptional Partner," adopting a total of four joint statements—a comprehensive "Japan-France Joint Leaders' Statement" plus separate joint statements on nuclear energy cooperation, AI cooperation, and global health. The summit took place in the midst of the energy crisis triggered by the Iran situation, lending urgency to discussions on energy security and critical goods. The main points of discussion were as follows:

- First, the designation "Exceptional Partner" reflects the depth and breadth of cooperation. Prime Minister Takaichi stated that France is an "Exceptional Partner" that shares values and principles with Japan and, recognizing France as an Indo-Pacific nation with territories in the region, expressed Japan's intention to "further strengthen strategic cooperation with France in areas such as security, defense, and economic security" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026d). This framing acknowledges France's unique position as both a major European power and an Indo-Pacific nation with Pacific territories, creating natural common ground with Japan's

regional and strategic interests.

- Second, both sides agreed to strengthen security and defense cooperation in particular, including through the holding of Japan-France Foreign and Defense Ministers' Meetings ("2+2") and the signing of a "Japan-France Defense Roadmap" by their respective authorities. Both sides noted that Japan-France defense cooperation has advanced qualitatively, with progress in port calls and stopovers of French military assets in Japan, steady implementation of Japan-France joint exercises, the dispatch of a Japan Air Self-Defense Force liaison officer to the French Space Command, and cooperation in the space domain including a Japan-France Comprehensive Space Dialogue.
- Third, economic security and critical minerals were prominently featured, with explicit reference to the situation in Iran. "The two leaders shared serious concerns regarding export controls on critical minerals and other materials that could affect global supply chains, and concurred on further strengthening strategic cooperation in the field of economic security, including enhancing supply chain resilience for critical minerals" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026a). In discussions on the situation in Iran, the leaders noted "the importance of ensuring the safety of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz," and "concurred on continuing close communication toward ensuring the stable supply of critical materials and the early de-escalation of the situation" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026a).
- Fourth, nuclear energy cooperation was addressed prominently through a separate joint statement. "The two leaders confirmed that they would strengthen cooperation in areas such as the development of fast reactors and the promotion of the nuclear fuel cycle as well as in the area of fusion energy" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026d). This cooperation addresses both energy security and climate goals, as advanced nuclear technologies offer pathways to reduced waste, enhanced safety, and ultimately the realization of fusion energy.
- Fifth, cooperation in the field of artificial intelligence (AI) was similarly addressed through a separate joint statement. Both leaders "confirmed that they would deepen cooperation on advanced technologies including AI and dual-use technologies, and coordinate toward launching a high-level dialogue on AI and hosting the AI Summit in Japan" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026d). The reference to "dual-use technology" acknowledges that many AI applications are relevant to both civilian and military domains and require coordinated governance frameworks. Strengthening cooperation with France—which hosted the AI Action Summit in 2025 and has been taking a leading role in AI—is also important from Japan's perspective.
- Sixth, global health cooperation was also addressed through a separate joint statement. This was grounded in a recognition of the global nature of health challenges posed by infectious disease and pandemic risks, demographic change, climate change, and environmental and security crises, and the need for international and multilateral coordinated action.
- Seventh, space cooperation was highlighted. "The two leaders welcomed the broad progress of Japan-France space cooperation and confirmed the importance of private sector cooperation between the two countries" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026d). The day after the summit, both leaders visited Astroscale Holdings Inc., where they received a briefing on on-orbit servicing including space debris removal. "Through this visit, the two leaders confirmed the increasing development of private sector cooperation between Japan and France in recent years and reaffirmed the continued close cooperation between the two countries in order to

ensure the sustainable and stable use of space domain." (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026e).

The following analytical observations can be derived from the above:

- The Japan-France discussions reveal the most comprehensive and institutionalized cooperation among the 2026 summits, reflected in the production of four separate joint statements covering different domains. This structure indicates a mature partnership with established mechanisms for multi-domain cooperation.
- Nuclear energy cooperation holds particular strategic significance, given France's global leadership in nuclear technology and Japan's incremental return to nuclear power generation in the post-Fukushima era. This cooperation responds to the growing momentum around global energy security in the wake of the Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the situation in Iran, while also contributing to decarbonization efforts. The focus on advanced technologies such as fast reactors, fuel cycles, and fusion reflects ambitions that go beyond current commercial nuclear power toward next-generation systems.
- AI cooperation reflects the recognition that artificial intelligence is fundamentally transforming economic, social, and military capabilities. Through the establishment of a high-level dialogue and cooperation toward hosting an AI Summit in Japan, both countries are seeking to establish themselves as leaders in AI governance and to ensure that AI development is aligned with democratic values and human rights.
- The explicit linkage of the situation in Iran, Strait of Hormuz, and critical resource supply highlights the interconnectedness of energy security, maritime security, and economic security. France's naval presence in the Indo-Pacific and Japan's dependence on Middle Eastern energy create shared interests in maintaining freedom of navigation and stable energy supply.
- The substantive nature of these efforts—with concrete cooperation frameworks, institutional mechanisms, and specific projects—is precisely what distinguishes them from declaratory partnerships.

3.4 Poland-Japan "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" (April 15, 2026)

The summit between Prime Minister Takaichi and Prime Minister Tusk, held on 15 April 2026, elevated the bilateral relationship to a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership." The summit reflected Poland's critical position in supporting Ukraine and its heightened profile in the European security architecture. The main points of discussion were as follows:

- First, the elevation to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership reflects Poland's growing importance in Europe and Japan's expanding engagement with Central and Eastern European countries. Both leaders "concurred in building even stronger bilateral relationship by elevating it to the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026f).
- Second, institutional development was also emphasized in security cooperation. Both sides "concurred in promoting discussions between the relevant authorities in order to intensify the cooperation on security matters, including the discussion on developing a framework for information security" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026f). Both leaders "welcomed the recently launched discussions on prospective negotiation of the security of information agreement" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026f), and cooperation on intelligence sharing and classified information handling has also advanced. Underlying the need for strengthened cooperation is a shared recognition of the indivisibility of security across regions, and the summit emphasized that "recognizing that security of the two regions is inseparable in today's interconnected

world, both leaders are determined to actively uphold and strengthen their engagement in relevant international and regional security organizations, close cooperation with like-minded partners, alliances with the United States, and continued development of their national defence capabilities." (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026f).

- Third, economic cooperation emphasized Poland's economic dynamism and Japanese investment. "Prime Minister Takaichi referred to Poland's steady economic growth and the deepening of economic cooperation, including the establishment of approximately 400 branches of Japanese companies operating in Poland, and welcomed the signing of the Agreement on Social Security as contributing to further facilitate economic exchanges between the two countries" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026f). The social security agreement serves to mitigate systemic barriers to labor mobility and long-term business continuity. This is particularly salient given Poland's robust economic outlook; IMF projections forecast a 3% growth rate for the 2025–2030 period. Notably, as of 31 December 2025, Poland's GDP per capita (PPP) has overtaken that of Japan, cementing its status as a formidable European market and a key economic ally for Japan.
- Fourth, as a like-minded partner sharing common values, the two sides facing Russia's threat agreed to strengthen cooperation toward enhanced economic security. "They further oppose actions by any actors seeking to undermine economic stability, social cohesion, and democratic processes through coordinated disinformation campaigns, state-sponsored propaganda, and cyberattacks. Japan and Poland remain committed to strengthening resilience against such hybrid threats, including critical infrastructure safety, through enhanced bilateral and multilateral cooperation with like-minded partners. Both leaders reaffirmed their determination to enhance cooperation on economic resilience and economic security, including building resilient and reliable supply chains, responding to non-market policies and practices, and overcapacity resulting from them, addressing economic coercion, export restrictions, particularly on critical minerals, their derivatives, and dual-use items, and preventing leakage of critical and emerging technologies" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026f). The agreement on upholding fundamental values such as democracy and strengthening resilience is particularly important for Poland, which is on the frontlines of Russia's hybrid threats.
- Fifth, solidarity with Ukraine was prominent. Prime Minister Takaichi "highlighted the role of Poland as a hub to support Ukraine and expressed her intention to continue to cooperate with Poland for realizing a just and lasting peace in Ukraine, recognizing that the fundamental principle that any unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion must not be tolerated remains unchanged" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026f). This language directly links European and Indo-Pacific security by reaffirming the universal principle of opposition to unilateral changes to the status quo by force—a principle applicable equally to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and to potential Chinese actions regarding Taiwan or the South China Sea, thus establishing the normative foundation for Japan-Poland cooperation in defense of the order based on the rule of law.

The following analytical observations can be derived from the above:

- Several strategic dimensions emerge from the Japan-Poland discussions. For Poland, the partnership with Japan offers economic opportunities through investment and technology transfer, enhanced security cooperation beyond traditional European frameworks, and diplomatic support for Poland's position on Ukraine and broader European security. For Japan,

Poland is a gateway to Central and Eastern European markets, a partner for promoting infrastructure connectivity as an alternative to Chinese projects, and a European voice that understands the challenges of living adjacent to a revisionist great power. Poland, which continues to achieve robust economic growth driven by economic openness and strong domestic demand—at a time when many European economies are stagnating—is of growing importance to Japan. The practical focus on economic cooperation, including the social security agreement and infrastructure connectivity, demonstrates that this partnership is grounded in concrete economic benefits and people-to-people exchanges, not merely declarations. The approximately 400 Japanese company branches in Poland testify to substantial existing economic integration that can serve as a foundation for deeper strategic cooperation.

- Furthermore, positioning Poland as a "hub to support Ukraine" and explicitly stating that "the fundamental principle that any unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion must not be tolerated remains unchanged" directly links European and Indo-Pacific security. This principle applies equally to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and to potential Chinese actions regarding Taiwan and the South China Sea, establishing the normative foundation for Japan-Poland cooperation in defense of the order based on the rule of law. Japan has consistently and comprehensively supported Ukraine since Russia's invasion, and in a situation where even within Europe there is no unanimity on continuing Ukraine support, Japan has become an indispensable partner for Europe on Ukraine policy.

3.5 Synthesis: Convergent Themes and Strategic Implications

A comprehensive analysis of the four summits and the statements issued reveals convergent themes and strategic implications.

3.5.1 Convergent Themes

- **Defense and security cooperation:**
  All four summits emphasized the deepening of defense and security cooperation. For Italy and the United Kingdom, GCAP provides a concrete embodiment, while for France and Poland, the "2+2" format provides an institutional framework. The discourse consistently frames this cooperation as strengthening strategic autonomy rather than creating dependencies, presenting the strengthening and expansion of partnerships among like-minded countries as a model of collective security in an era of systemic competition.
- **Economic security and critical minerals:**
  The emphasis on cooperation in economic security and critical minerals is prominent across all four summits. This consistency reflects a shared strategic assessment that supply chain vulnerabilities—particularly regarding China-dominated materials—represent a fundamental threat to sovereignty and prosperity. The discourse positions economic security not as a narrow trade issue but as an essential component of comprehensive security, requiring coordinated action among like-minded countries.
- **Values-based international order:**
  All four summits emphasized shared commitments to democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and the order based on the rule of law. This normative foundation is what distinguishes Japan-Europe cooperation from merely declaratory relationships and provides the foundation for a coordinated response to authoritarian challenges. The discourse consistently emphasizes values,

arguing that commitment to the order based on the rule of law serves both sets of strategic objectives.

- **Advanced technology cooperation:**
  All four summits emphasized cooperation in advanced technology domains including AI, semiconductors, cybersecurity, space, nuclear energy, and digital infrastructure. This reflects a recognition that technological leadership is essential for both economic competitiveness and national security, and that no single country can maintain leadership in all critical domains. The discourse frames technology cooperation as mutually beneficial, with each partner contributing unique strengths.
- **Indivisibility of Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security:**
  All four summits confirmed, explicitly or implicitly, that security challenges in Europe and the Indo-Pacific are interrelated. This framing justifies cooperation between geographically distant partners and establishes a foundation for mutual support in regional crises. The discourse challenges the traditional geographic boundaries of security partnerships and argues that like-minded democracies have shared interests in maintaining global stability and deterring aggression.

3.5.2 Strategic Vision

The thematic consistency across the four summits indicates that a coherent strategic vision is forming between Japan and its major European partners. This vision rests on several key strategic premises.

- **Strategic autonomy through cooperation:**
  Strategic autonomy is most effectively achieved through partnerships that share resources, technology, and expertise among like-minded countries facing common challenges, and coordinate policies.
- **Economic security as national security:**
  Supply chain vulnerabilities, technological dependencies, and energy security concerns are not merely economic challenges but fundamental threats to sovereignty, and require governmental responses and international cooperation more than ever in an increasingly unstable international environment.
- **Values as strategic assets:**
  Shared commitments to democracy, the rule of law, and human rights provide a foundation of trust, facilitate cooperation, and are of critical importance in distinguishing from relationships with authoritarian regimes and in responding to various challenges.
- **Integrated deterrence across domains:**
  Effective deterrence and the achievement of security goals require capabilities spanning military, economic, technological, and informational domains, and cooperation among partners is of paramount importance.
- **Global scope of security interests:**
  Japan and Europe face common challenges in all dimensions of security and economic security, and the need for both regions to cooperate in responding to them is greater than ever before.

This strategic vision also represents an evolution toward a more networked model of cooperation among multiple middle powers and regional leaders. While the Japan-U.S. alliance and NATO remain the foundation, Japan-Europe partnerships create additional nodes of cooperation

that strengthen collective resilience.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Future Challenges: Differing Interpretations of Strategic Autonomy

While the 2026 summits demonstrate a powerful sharing of strategic goals between Japan and its European partners, several challenges remain in translating this into coordinated action.

- **Challenge 1: Balancing de-risking and engagement with China**.
  Both Japan and Europe face the challenge of reducing strategic dependence on China while maintaining beneficial economic relations. However, views remain divided on the optimal balance between de-risking and engagement. Some European countries—particularly those with significant stakes in exports to China—support de-risking policies while resisting, amid industrial competitiveness concerns and economic stagnation, measures that could invite Chinese retaliation or cut off market access. Japan, which has directly experienced Chinese economic pressure, generally supports stronger de-risking measures. As Zhou et al. (2024, p. 1) note, both the EU and Japan have adopted risk-mitigation measures in their economic relations with China, but their approaches differ due to economic interdependence and domestic factors. Aligning these approaches requires ongoing dialogue to ensure that risk-mitigation measures complement rather than undermine each other, without creating new vulnerabilities or competitive disadvantages.
- **Challenge 2: Harmonizing Sustainability and Security Requirements**.
  The green transition creates tensions between sustainability goals and security requirements. The rapid expansion of renewable energy and electric vehicles requires vast quantities of critical minerals, many of which are dominated by China or extracted under conditions that raise environmental and human rights concerns. Europe must pursue a strategic raw materials policy that balances sustainability with supply security and the maintenance and strengthening of industrial competitiveness. Japan and Europe must overcome these tensions by advancing investment in recycling infrastructure, development of alternative materials, and support for responsible mining in partner countries. The discussions at the 2026 summits acknowledged these challenges by emphasizing both sustainability and security, but translating this into coherent policy requires difficult trade-offs.
- **Challenge 3: Institutional Coordination and Implementation.**
  The strengthening of bilateral partnerships, multilateral initiatives, and sectoral cooperation frameworks is creating coordination challenges. Japan now maintains different partnership frameworks with Italy, the United Kingdom, France, Poland, and the EU as a whole, each with different institutional mechanisms, priorities, and timelines. Ensuring that these partnerships complement rather than conflict with each other requires sustained diplomatic effort and institutional coordination. Furthermore, translating summit commitments into concrete action requires follow-up at the working level, resource allocation, and the maintenance and strengthening of political will that may weaken as immediate crises subside. The challenge is to institutionalize cooperation through regular dialogue, joint projects, and co-investment that builds a broad base of support for sustained engagement. It will be important for Japan and Europe to carefully follow up on various initiatives, including through the momentum of regular Japan-EU summit meetings

4.2 Conclusion

The series of Japan-Europe summits held in 2026 represents a historic deepening of strategic cooperation, driven by common challenges and converging interests. The series of enhanced cooperative efforts reflects a recognition that strategic autonomy in an era of systemic rivalry necessitates collaboration among like-minded countries, rather than autarkic isolationism.

While divergent views on strategic autonomy, conflicting economic interests, and institutional hurdles are poised to strain these partnerships, the alignment observed in the four summits signifies a robust strategic consensus. This consensus, centered on economic security, defense collaboration, technological synergy, and the preservation of a value-based international order, underscores a unified vision shared by Japan and Europe.

For Japan and Europe, the future diplomatic trajectory necessitates a delicate balancing of multiple imperatives: pursuing de-risking rather than a complete decoupling from China; advancing sustainability goals while ensuring supply stability; and forging new partnerships while sustaining existing relations. Achieving these objectives will require sustained follow-up to translate the high-level consensus reached by leaders into concrete cooperation across policy implementation and broad-based economic sectors.

The international order stands at a critical inflection point, where authoritarian powers challenge democratic norms, economic interdependence is weaponized for coercive ends, and technological innovation engenders both novel vulnerabilities and opportunities. Within this context, the cooperation between Japan and Europe—geographically distant yet normatively aligned—delineates a path toward strategic autonomy that reinforces rather than fragments the rules-based international order. The 2026 summits have laid the essential groundwork; the challenge now lies in building upon this foundation through sustained commitment and tangible action.

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