

Changing European Perceptions of China and Deepening Engagement in the Indo-Pacific

European countries continued to have their hands full dealing with coronavirus infections in 2021 like in 2020. As the competition for supremacy between the United States and China continued to intensify, the EU's and European countries' perceptions of China changed significantly. Against this backdrop, European countries' interest in the Indo-Pacific region has been growing and this is reflected in their policies and activities. After leaving the EU, the UK deepened

its involvement in the Indo-Pacific region while experiencing difficulties in its relations with the EU. With the transition of the United States to a new administration, cooperation through NATO, which had been neglected during the Trump years, was once again promoted, but the lack of coordination at the time of US forces withdrawal from Afghanistan sparked criticism of the United States.



Specialists on the laybarge Fortuna performing an above water tie-in during the final stage of Nord Stream 2 pipeline construction in the Baltic Sea, September 2021. (Photo by NORD STREAM 2 AG/AFP/Aflo)

Changing European perceptions of China and deepening engagement in the Indo-Pacific

One significant strategic change in Europe in 2021 was the change in perceptions of China. At the end of 2020, an agreement was reached on a “Comprehensive Agreement on Investment” between the EU and China under the leadership of Germany, which held the presidency of the European Union. However, sentiment in the European Parliament, whose approval is required for ratification of this agreement, radically changed in 2021. The European Parliament has long been concerned about issues of human rights and democracy under the Chinese government, particularly the issue of forced labor involving the Uighur minority. When the EU, the UK, the US and Canada announced sanctions against Chinese government officials in March for human rights violations against ethnic Uighurs, China responded by immediately imposing sanctions on European parliamentarians and EU diplomats. This led to further backlash, and the European Parliament froze its deliberations on ratifying the investment pact in May.

The European Council launched “A Globally Connected Europe” initiative in June. This new strategy underlines the need for the EU to pursue a geopolitical and global approach to connectivity, and aims to

promote the EU's economic, diplomatic, development policy and security interests and advance European values. Targeting Africa and Latin America, where China has made significant inroads in recent years, the strategy appears designed to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It can be said that the EU's relationship with China has also become more competitive from the perspective of connectivity.

The EU and the European Parliament have taken an increasingly harsh view of China. The Taiwan Strait was mentioned for the first time in the joint declaration adopted at the US-EU summit in June. In September, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen made a policy speech in which she criticized China and worried about dictatorial regimes using the Indo-Pacific region to expand their own influence. In the same month, the European Parliament adopted a new EU-China strategy report. The report, which spent 17 paragraphs on China's human rights record in Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, Tibet and Hong Kong, said there could be no lifting of the freeze on the ratification process unless retaliatory sanctions imposed by China against the EU were lifted. In a report on EU-Taiwan relations adopted by the European Parliament in October, the EU expressed its readiness to further strengthen ties with Taiwan and to begin preparations for concluding an investment agreement with Taiwan. These responses by the EU overturned the impression that the EU had been "soft" on China.

China established the "16+1 (later expanded to 17+1)" economic cooperation framework with Central and Eastern European countries in 2012 and has since held summits almost every year. China has also been expanding cooperation under the BRI and its mask and vaccine diplomacy in response to the coronavirus outbreak. For this reason, many Central and Eastern European countries had been considered "pro-China," but these relations also changed in 2021. At the 17+1 Summit held online in February, the three Baltic states as well as Romania and Bulgaria decided not to attend at the head of state level, and in June, Lithuania announced its withdrawal from the 17+1. In July, Lithuania also approved the establishment of a mission using the name "Taiwan," and China downgraded diplomatic relations with Lithuania in response. In addition, some countries such as the Czech Republic repeatedly made clearly pro-Taiwan statements backed by the public opinion. Relations between Europe and Taiwan are growing stronger, with Taiwanese ministers visiting the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Lithuania, and European delegations from the Baltic states, France and the European Parliament visiting Taiwan one after another.

European countries' interest in the Indo-Pacific region has further increased as the EU's views on China have become more disapproving, and this has been demonstrated in concrete terms through policies and activities. In September, the European Commission and the High Representative issued a joint policy paper entitled "EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific", in which the EU committed to deepening its engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. It said that rising tensions in the Indo-Pacific could

have a direct impact on European security and prosperity and that the EU was prepared to “use all tools at its disposal” as “a consistent defender of human rights and democracy”.

European countries are also taking a greater strategic interest in the Indo-Pacific region and demonstrating their commitment to the region in concrete actions. France has territories in the Indo-Pacific and has been demonstrating strong interest in this region. French President Emmanuel Macron visited Japan and French Polynesia in July and announced the “Indo-Pacific Strategy” a few days later. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the French army conducted its first joint exercise with the Ground Self-Defense Force in Japan in May, and French navy dispatched ships at regular intervals to the Indo-Pacific. The German navy has dispatched warships to the Indo-Pacific region since August, and these ships made a port call in Japan in November for the first time in about 20 years.

The United Kingdom, faced with an urgent need to conduct a comprehensive review of its foreign policy strategy after its withdrawal from the EU, has been working to materialize its “Global Britain” initiative. In its Integrated Review 2021 released in March, the UK declared that the Indo-Pacific region is becoming the geopolitical center of the world, and included measures to strengthen ties with countries like Japan, South Korea, Australia and India. In August and September, the new aircraft carrier



The Royal Navy aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth (R 08), the guided-missile destroyer USS Halsey (DDG 97) and the guided-missile cruiser USS Shiloh (CG 67) operate in formation in the Gulf of Aden, July 2021. (Photo by U.S. Navy/Abaca/Aflo)

HMS *Queen Elizabeth* was dispatched to the Indo-Pacific, and in September it made a port call in Japan and conducted training with American and Dutch forces. On September 15, Australia, the UK and the US announced the establishment of AUKUS, a new security framework, and made it clear that they would step up their commitment to the Indo-Pacific region. Japan and the UK are aiming to hold joint exercises between the Self-Defense Forces and the British Armed Forces. Negotiations began in October for the conclusion of a Japan-UK Reciprocal Access Agreement. The UK has also announced its intent to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and deepened its involvement in various fields in the Indo-Pacific region by engaging with ASEAN as a “Dialogue Partner.”

Opportunities and challenges for European solidarity and multilateral cooperation

The aftereffects of Brexit continued to be felt in 2021. Residents and businesses in the UK were strongly

dissatisfied with special measures taken for Northern Ireland, especially those pertaining to customs clearance and quarantine, following the UK's exit from the EU, leading to violent incidents in Northern Ireland. Britain has sought changes to the Northern Ireland Protocol and the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, but the EU has not altered its positions of refusal. There was also discord between the UK and the EU over coronavirus vaccine exports. Anglo-French relations have deteriorated due to the ongoing conflict over fishing rights following Brexit, as well as Australia's abrogation of its contract with France to procure submarines in favor of obtaining nuclear-powered submarines from the US and the UK under the AUKUS framework.

European countries continued to suffer from the coronavirus pandemic in many ways in 2021. Vaccination rates varied across Europe, with high vaccination rates achieved in southern and northern Europe while rates remained low in central and eastern Europe. Countries began easing restrictions in the summer, but the autumn brought a serious resurgence in infections, with Germany recording the highest number of cases since the outbreak began. As a result, some countries have announced plans to reimpose new restrictions or enact vaccine mandates. Hungary and Poland strongly opposed an EU proposal that the distribution of funds from the coronavirus recovery fund be conditional on observing the "rule of law," leading to a situation in which agreement on the coronavirus recovery fund was threatened at one point, thus the problem of "authoritarian states" within Europe came to the fore. In Poland, the Constitutional Tribunal ruled in October that EU law may not prevail over domestic law, prompting the European Parliament to call on the European Commission to impose measures aimed at suspending the implementation of the EU's budget for Poland, claiming that this ruling could undermine the fundamental values of the EU, and European Commission President von der Leyen added to the harsh criticism of Poland. In response, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki claimed that he was being attacked by EU leaders, exposing the confrontation with the EU. However, in November, when Belarus was suspected of deliberately gathering thousands of refugees on its border with Poland in order to pressure the EU to lift its ongoing sanctions imposed over Belarus' presidential election, the EU and Poland united to challenge President Alexander Lukashenko's increasingly authoritarian rule.

Following the establishment of the Biden administration, moves were made in NATO to reaffirm and bolster the unity that had been greatly strained under the Trump administration. Regarding NATO 2030, which was announced at the end of 2020, the NATO heads of state reaffirmed their agreement in the Summit Communiqué at the June NATO Summit and pledged to strengthen the alliance politically. This joint statement recognized China and Russia as security risks, and called on China, which it said presents "systemic challenges", to act responsibly in international affairs, while maintaining dialogue. NATO took an unyielding stance toward Russia, terming its actions "a threat to Euro-Atlantic security" and demanding that Russia withdraw its forces from Ukraine, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova.

Relations between NATO and Russia deteriorated further following the release of the Communiqué. After it was announced on October 7 that eight diplomats in Russia's NATO mission had been disqualified for being intelligence officers, Russia announced on the 18th that it would suspend the activities of the NATO office in Moscow and halt the activities of the Russian mission in Brussels. The assembly of a large Russian force near the border with Ukraine since autumn has been met with an exchange of accusations between NATO, which views this as an increased threat to Ukraine, and Russia, which regards this as a measure to counter NATO's support of Ukraine. In December, Russia published a draft treaty between the United States and Russia guaranteeing that NATO will not expand eastward. The United States stated that the legally binding guarantee included provisions that were clearly unacceptable, but expressed its willingness to discuss the issue.

The Biden administration stressed the importance of US commitment to NATO and strategic communication between allies. However, in Afghanistan, it continued the Trump administration's withdrawal policy and decided on a schedule for pulling out by the end of August without consulting NATO, which had been working together with the US to rebuild the country. As the Taliban took control of Kabul, the withdrawal of troops and evacuation of other personnel from various countries took place amid chaos. The Biden administration's approach was denounced as "self-centered" by other NATO countries, as it resembled the Trump administration's disdain for multilateral alliances in essence despite a change in language and style.

Germany, which has become more prominent in the post-Brexit EU, held its quadrennial federal elections in September. Angela Merkel, who had been in power for 16 years and influential in many EU policies, announced her resignation ahead of the elections, marking the end of her long-term incumbency. The elections ended in a crushing defeat for the ruling CDU, and led to the formation of the first three-party (SPD, FDP and Green Party) coalition government in German federal history. Merkel has been known to place importance on economic relations with China and not take a hostile attitude toward China. However, Germany's policy toward China is expected to change, as the Green Party leader who emphasizes human rights became foreign minister of the new government and that a critical view on China's human rights situation was expressed in the November 24 coalition government agreement. The coalition agreement also calls for Germany to participate as an observer in the March 2022 Meeting of States Parties to the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. NATO countries under the US nuclear umbrella have consistently opposed the treaty, and with Germany following the lead of Norway, which announced in October that it would be participating as an observer, there will likely be discussions within NATO on Germany's policies.

Perspectives and recommendations

Following the Bundestag elections in Germany, a presidential election will be held in France in April 2022. With the exit of Merkel, who has been a driving force behind European integration for many years, attention will be focused on whether there will be a change in the EU policy of Germany, which has been increasing its presence in the post-Brexit EU. The outcome of the presidential election in France, which has a major influence on EU policy along with Germany, will be of particular interest, even more so as the country also holds the EU presidency in the first half of 2022.

Japan and Europe share fundamental values such as democracy and can expect continued substantial cooperation as strategic partners. European countries have designated Japan as a partner in the Indo-Pacific region, and it is important for Japan to continue its efforts to ensure that support for a “free and open Indo-Pacific” is reflected in the specific policies and actions of European countries, as well as of the EU and NATO, by further promoting bilateral cooperation with these countries and by stepping up cooperation with the EU, which in 2021 took a sterner view of China and greater interest in the Indo-Pacific, and with NATO. From this viewpoint, closer military and security cooperation, including the dispatch of warships to the Indo-Pacific by European countries and joint exercises with Japan that happened one after another in 2021, is a welcome means of opening new possibilities for cooperation. The Japanese government needs to continue pursuing active diplomacy to further heighten the interest of European countries, the EU and NATO in the Indo-Pacific, and deepen their engagement. In doing so, it is crucial to consider improving cooperation not only between Japan and Europe but also between QUAD countries and European countries. Japan and Europe should also team up in promoting multilateral cooperation in areas that combine values and technology such as the advanced technology supply chains consisting of democratic countries advocated by President Biden and endorsed by Europe and Japan.

It is also essential that Japan reinforce its relations with the UK, which has become more involved in the Indo-Pacific region under the Global Britain initiative since its departure from the EU. Japan and the UK, both close allies of the United States, have been gradually strengthening their diplomatic and security cooperation. Japan should actively pursue policies to further consolidate bilateral relations, including support for the UK’s accession to the CPTPP and promoting closer ties between its Self-Defense Forces and the British military. ■