



## EU–JAPAN REACH AGREEMENT ON COOPERATION: LONG DAY’S JOURNEY INTO WHAT?

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*Far away from Libya, Afghanistan and other hot spots that monopolize the interest of the media, the political leaders of the EU and Japan met on May 28 and signed two new agreements on EU–Japan collaboration. The agreements replace the 2001 EU–Japan Action Plan that was soon to expire. The EU and Japan have great ambitions to have a say in the world but the agreements indicate that EU–Japan collaboration has lost steam.*

When the EU and Japan signed an agreement for cooperation back in 2001, it was baptized the *EU–Japan Action Plan*. It is likely that the designation “Action Plan” was chosen to symbolize the dynamic nature that the two parties wanted the agreement on future cooperation to have. It was an amazingly ambitious plan. It listed more than 100 areas, ranging from joint peacekeeping and security cooperation to global and bilateral economic and trade cooperation, where the EU and Japan were going to cooperate during until 2011.

Eventually, work was initiated to prepare for a new agreement that was to be signed in 2011. It must have been almost shocking to officials both in Brussels and Tokyo, when they had to conclude that the very ambitious Action Plan of 2001 had resulted in next to nothing. Few of the many cooperative projects envisaged had materialized.

### **Gloom rather than Boom**

The officials in Brussels and Tokyo, who were engaged in the preparatory discussions for the prospective new Action Plan of 2011, seem to have decided that radical action had to be taken. Both parties agreed to focus on non-tariff barriers (NTB); a tricky issue in EU–Japan relations. Thus, work went from the very ambitious agenda of the 2001 Action Plan to an agenda of limited scope. In discussions I had in mid-2009 with one of the Japanese involved in the preparatory work, I was told that this focus had been chosen in order to increase *trust* between the two parties.

It was certainly needed. In November 2009, I participated in the 12th EU–Japan Annual Conference, where I

had been asked to deliver a report on Japan’s policy for human security. An impressive array of diplomats, scholars, students and foreign ministry officials from both the Commission and Japan’s foreign ministry participated.

This conference was an almost surreal experience. The atmosphere was gloomy. The work for preparing the new agreement was in full swing, but dark clouds hung over the officials involved in the preparatory work for a new agreement, and no silver lining could be traced. Choosing NTB as the focus of negotiations meant *de facto* that negotiation had to focus on problems, rather than building trust.

The result of this was seen at the EU–Japan Summit on May 28, 2011, when the result of the prolonged negotiations was signed and sealed. Despite strenuous efforts by foreign ministry officials in Brussels and Tokyo, they had not been able to overcome the hurdles that lay in the way for what was to replace the 2001 Action Plan. Since virtually every item on the long lists of NTB prepared by both sides constituted a tricky problem, hard to solve, the focus on NTB meant that work got stuck in the nitty-gritty details of exceedingly complicated NTB matters. The idea that a new comprehensive action plan would replace the 2001 Action Plan had to be scrapped. Instead of a new comprehensive action plan, two agreements were signed. Unfortunately, the two agreements signed on May 28 do not tell much about what are awaiting. The level of ambitions for future cooperation is modest.

The modest result of the cumbersome negotiations is indicative of the state of relations between the EU and Japan. In international affairs, both are actors with ambitions to play an important role. Japan is an economic giant, albeit



now with towering problems. The EU with its 27 member states is also one of the world's economic power centers, albeit also with problems at the moment. Internal problems for both spill over to external relations and limit available options. Both have ambitions but in terms of the global powers they aspire to be, they are quite frustrated. Capacity and will do not match.

## Bureaucrats Left in the Lurch

At the 2009 EU–Japan conference, I was struck by another fact. At that time, a new commission was on its way in, so officials representing the Commission started their presentations by noting that awaiting the new commissioner, they did not have the authority to say anything – only to go on presenting very detailed plans and prospects. For me, it was a clear signal that, as far as EU–Japan relations are concerned, when politics is formed, the key persons are the officials, not the politicians who we as citizens vote into power in the EU elections.

But officials are, as we all know, bureaucrats, and bureaucrats run the show in the way bureaucrats do. Considering the outcome, it was a serious mistake to focus on NTB in the work that would lead up to the new comprehensive agreement replacing the 2001 Action Plan. The mistake was made because when work started for preparing the new cooperation agreement Japan, it was clear to observers, and certainly the EU and Japanese officials, that the 2001 Action Plan was a failure. Not much of this comprehensive and very ambitious plan for action had materialized.

The bureaucrats wanted to ensure that the new agreement to be signed in 2011 would not repeat the mistake of being overambitious like the 2001 Action Plan. So they chose an exceedingly narrow focus, NTB. Subsequently, EU and Japanese officials engaged in long, arduous and cumbersome negotiations the only result of which were, basal-

ly, fairly watered down agreements of rather modest scope.

## Lack of Political Leadership

The basic problem is, I think, the virtual non-existence of political will on both sides. The leaders of the EU and Japan seem to have been satisfied with having the bureaucrats struggle with the list of “priorities,” lists so excruciatingly long that, in reality, there have not been any priorities. The officials have been left in the lurch by the politicians, left on their own to try to handle the situation, without clear instructions, it seems, from their bosses.

To the political leaderships of both the EU and Japan, other matters are more pressing than Japan to the EU and the EU to Japan. Rhetorically, of course, they matter to each other, but their focus lies elsewhere, lured as they are by the “China Rising” perspective. For the EU, relations with China are much more on the agenda than Japan. In 2003, the EU even declared that China was “a strategic partner.” Also for Japan, relations with the EU dwarf in comparison with U.S. and China relations.

The outcome of the EU–Japan Summit on May 28 and the inability to come up with a comprehensive new Action Plan replacing the old one vindicate that Japan and the EU are relegated to the backseat as partners to each other. It's a serious mistake, but that's the way it is. It should be rectified since the EU and Japan should be natural partners in world politics.

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