

# JAPAN'S RELATIONS WITH VISEGRÁD 4 (V4) AND THE CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES (CEECS): ADJUSTING MISMATCHES?

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<https://doi.org/10.47706/KKIFPR.2021.1.111-123>

**Abstract:** Japan and the Visegrád Group (V4) have enjoyed stable and problem-free relations. However, Japan's engagement with the V4 countries has lacked dynamism and robustness in areas such as Japan's foreign direct investment in the V4 countries and visits by high-ranking Japanese officials to V4. This paper discusses the asymmetric relations between Japan and V4 from the Japanese perspective, focusing mainly on how and why Japan failed to place more emphasis on strengthening its relations with the V4 countries. Three backgrounds for this situation are identified—the US- and China-centric nature of Japan's foreign policy, Japan's large-country focus in its outlook and policies concerning Europe, and Japan's somewhat outdated self-image as a significant donor and supporter of the Central and Eastern European countries.

**Keywords:** Japan and the Visegrád Group (V4)

## Introduction

Japan and the Visegrád-4 (V4) group, i.e., Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, have enjoyed stable and problem-free relations for over 15 years since the official start of the dialogue between Japan and the group. Since 2019, the relationship between V4 and Japan has also been embedded in the larger framework of the EU-Japan

Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) and the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA), both of which have made the ties between Japan and the V4 countries more multi-layered and multi-faceted.

However, Japan's engagement with the V4 countries has lacked dynamism and robustness in areas such as Japan's foreign direct investment in the V4 countries and visits by high-ranking Japanese officials to V4. Arguably, therefore, there has been a structural gap or mismatch between what the V4 countries expect from Japan and what Japan can or is willing to deliver for the V4-Japan relationship.

This paper problematises the asymmetric relations between Japan and V4 from the Japanese perspective, focusing mainly on how and why Japan failed to place more emphasis on fortifying its relationship with the V4 countries. It identifies three backgrounds for the occurrence of this mismatch—the US- and China-centric nature of Japan's foreign policy, Japan's large-country focus in its outlook and policies concerning Europe, and Japan's rather outdated self-image as an important donor and supporter of the Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs).

Japan's recent active diplomacy towards the V4 countries demonstrates its newly gained eagerness to bring fresh impetus to Japan-V4 relations. While it is obviously a welcome development, Japan needs to have a stronger awareness that fortifying ties with the V4/CEEC countries has its own merits—in other words, Japan should not see them exclusively as an ally in its efforts to compete with the growing influence of China in the region. To improve this situation, it is important for Japan to gain a more concrete understanding of the infrastructural needs of the V4 countries and examine how it could substantially contribute to those needs.

## Japan and the V4 countries: a problem-free relationship?

The official start of the dialogue between Japan and the V4 group dates back to the early 2000s. During the visit of the then Prime Minister Koizumi to the Czech Republic and Poland in August 2003, and the visit

of the Hungarian prime minister to Japan in October 2004, it was agreed to promote the 'V4+Japan' dialogue and cooperation between Japan and the V4 group. Since then, two rounds of summit meetings, seven rounds of ministers of foreign affairs meetings, and numerous thematic conferences and workshops (covering topics such as migration, cyber security, Brexit, science, and technology) have been held between Japan and the V4 group. The consultations and cooperation between V4 and Japan across various sectors have been described by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA) as 'multi-layered diplomacy towards Europe'.

The exchanges between V4 and Japan can be assessed positively to a large extent. According to a report published by the Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS), 'the V4+Japan format has become one of the most mature of the V4+ partnerships, encompassing cooperation and consultations on various issues.' issues' (Dubravčíková et al., 2019□ 22). Compared to other 'V4+' formats that started in the 2010s, such as V4+LAC (Latin America and the Caribbean), V4+South Korea, V4+Egypt, and V4+African Union, V4+Japan is generally seen as a pioneering partnership, having the longest history and the widest range of cooperation among all cooperative frameworks that the V4 group has instituted (ibid.).

For Japan as well, V4+Japan is one of the oldest and by far the most successful multilateral platforms with European countries□ Japan of course has extensive experience when it comes to bilateral consultations with European countries as well as the European Union, but the dialogues with the V4 countries represent the earliest experience for Japan of holding an institutionalised policy consultation with a regional group within the European Union.<sup>1</sup> After the launch of V4+Japan, Japan and the GUAM countries (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova) inaugurated the GUAM+1 framework in 2007. While the framework held annual ministerial meetings until 2019, the scope of consultation and cooperation was much more limited than that of V4+Japan. Likewise, Japan launched the Western Balkans Cooperation Initiative in 2018 with the aim of supporting socio-economic reforms in the Western

Balkan countries that were necessary for their EU accession, as well as facilitating cooperation within the region. Therefore, this initiative is qualitatively different from V4+Japan, as the former places more emphasis on assistance, while the latter stresses cooperation on an equal footing.

However, there are many aspects where Japan could and should have sought to fortify relations with the V4 countries more actively. Among others, Japan's investments in the region have always been cautious and not lived up to the region's expectations—they have been surpassed by South Korea's and China's investments for many years now. Constant demands from the V4 countries for more Japanese investments in the region have not been sufficiently fulfilled. In addition, the frequency of visits by high-ranking officials, such as the Japanese prime minister and other important political leaders, to the V4 countries has been low despite requests from V4—in June 2013, Shinzo Abe became the first Japanese prime minister to visit Poland in ten years. Abe visited Slovakia in April 2019 for the first time as the Japanese prime minister. Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko visited Hungary in July 2002, while no prime minister of Japan has visited Hungary since 2000. No prime minister of Japan visited the Czech Republic since Koizumi's visit in 2003. The visits by the heads of the states and ministers of the V4 countries have therefore constantly outnumbered those by their Japanese counterparts, which has inevitably made the relationship between V4 and Japan asymmetrical.

This is not to say that Japan, as a whole, has had little interest in the V4/CEECs. On the contrary, in areas such as history, linguistics, and cultural studies, the V4/CEECs have attracted significant interest in Japan. Numerous academic studies concerning the V4/CEECs have been conducted, and their results have been actively published.<sup>2</sup> Works by outstanding historians and authors from the V4/CEECs, such as Victor Sebestyen (2006, 2009)<sup>3</sup> and Ivan Krastev (2017—Krastev & Holmes, 2019)<sup>4</sup>, as well as by authors who are well known for their analyses of the history of the region, such as Anne Applebaum (2012, 2020)<sup>5</sup> and Timothy Garton Ash, were translated into Japanese and published shortly after the publication of the original versions. It is therefore all

the more regrettable that such established interests towards the culture and history of the V4/CEECs have not been adequately passed on to Japan's diplomatic endeavour to fortify relations with the V4/CEECs.

One of the very noticeable negative side effects of Japan's inactive foreign relations vis-à-vis the V4 countries was its failure to capitalise on some important political and economic developments in the V4/CEECs, that is, the once glowing and now fading influence of China in the region. Even though Japan has recently been vigilant about China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it failed to regard the V4/CEECs as an important target of the BRI, particularly in the framework of '16(17)+1', which is a platform for cooperation between China and the CEEC and Western Balkan countries.<sup>6</sup> Learning from the V4 experience of 16(17)+1 could be valuable for Japan, especially in terms of assessing the extent of China's influence in a particular area of Europe and considering how Japan should respond to the challenges posed by the BRI. However, it is only recently that Japan has started being aware of the significance of 16(17)+1 in the V4/CEECs.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, such awareness came only when those countries had already started to lose their interest in the framework.

## Missed opportunity?

### The way Japan perceived V4/CEEC/Europe

The reasons why Japan failed to notice China's influence in the V4/CEECs effectively highlight the peculiarity of Japan's view of international and European affairs. At least three such peculiarities can be identified: (i) the US- and China-centric nature of Japan's foreign policy, (ii) Japan's focus on large countries in its outlook towards Europe, and (iii) a rather outdated self-image of Japan as an important donor and supporter of the V4/CEECs. These three peculiarities should be scrutinised individually in order to identify the ways in which Japan can improve and fortify its relations with the V4/CEECs in a meaningful manner.

First, it is widely known that Japan's interest in international affairs has traditionally been dominated by its relationship with the US. In

In addition, Japan's policy towards China has long been extremely controversial, continuously oscillating between pro- and anti-China positions. In addition, the US-China confrontation during the Trump administration from 2017 to 2021 weighed heavily on Japan, with the situation remaining unchanged even after the inauguration of the Biden administration, which has continued to take a hardened position towards China. Too often, Japan's foreign policy interest has been too narrowly focused on how Japan should behave amidst the confrontation between these two great powers, while it is more than obvious that Japan needs to prioritise the US-Japan relationship, not least from the alliance viewpoint, its economic interdependence with China is also critical for Japan's economic survival. Since the main point of interest, or worry, has been how and to what extent the US-China confrontation is relevant to Japan and how to deal with it, Japan's interest in Europe has remained secondary.

Second, even when Japan turns its eyes to Europe, it usually tends to focus its attention on larger countries, namely the United Kingdom, Germany, and France, and to a lesser extent on smaller nations like Italy. Since 2015 in particular, there have been reports in Japan on how large European countries were getting closer to China, as evident from the (in)famous statement by the then UK Prime Minister David Cameron concerning the 'golden age of UK-China relations', the slew of announcements by the UK and other European governments regarding their decision to join the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the Italian government's signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with China on the BRI. Among others, the Merkel administration's apparent pro-China posture received negative coverage in Japanese media. Merkel visited China 12 times during the 15 years of her time in office but visited Japan only five times.

Currently, Europe's position towards China has hardened considerably over concerns about widespread human rights abuses and crimes against humanity, including the forced labour issue in Xinjiang, suppression of the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong,

and the suspected covering-up of the information concerning the origin of COVID-19. The freezing of the ratification process of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) in May 2021 is indeed a sign that the honeymoon period is over for the relationship between Europe and China. Even Germany, apparently the most China-friendly European country in the eyes of many Japanese people, is actively seeking a new China strategy in the post-Merkel era.

However, it seems that Japan still retains the afterimage of European countries from the mid-2010s when many European countries actively sought to fortify economic ties with China, and largely regards European countries as being 'too pro-China' or 'too soft on China' (Tsuruoka, 2021). The V4/CEECs, which have largely been described by Japanese media as sharing a similar enthusiasm with Germany in establishing economic ties with China, are also considered as being too pro-China (Nikkei, 2021), even though it is now widely known that many V4/CEEC countries have lost their enthusiasm to maintain close economic relationships with China (Brînză, 2021).

Last but not least, it is important to note the significant paradox arising from Japan's experience in assisting the CEECs immediately after the end of the Cold War in that it has left Japan with a rather outdated self-image of being an important donor and supporter of the CEECs. This obsolete self-image may have hindered Japan's efforts to keep itself updated about the latest developments in the CEECs, in particular their fast-track relationship with China in the framework of 16(17)+1. Indeed, Japan's economic assistance at the time of the Kaifu administration in the early 1990s was noteworthy in its size and amount.<sup>8</sup> In addition, Japan's investments in the V4 countries in the early 1990s, including the successful Magyar Suzuki Zrt venture, were dynamic. Until the 2000s, it was stated in the Diplomatic Bluebook by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan that 'Japan has provided assistance to the Central and South Eastern European countries for their democratization and transition to market economies since the end of the Cold War, and has been making efforts to build preferable relations with these countries in expectation of EU enlargement and a deepening of European integration' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of

Japan, op. cit. 98). This demonstrates the widely shared belief within the diplomatic circle in Japan that besides the US and Europe, Japan has been one of the main providers of considerable assistance to the CEECs in the difficult period of their transition. In reality, however, as argued above, the Japanese economic engagement in the region weakened gradually and was surpassed first by South Korea and then by China as early as the mid-2000s. However, the self-image that Japan is one of the most significant supporters of the V4/CEECs has somehow persisted, preventing Japan from improving its knowledge on the latest developments in the region, including the rise and fall of China's influence in the region.

## Towards stronger ties between Japan and the V4 group

The COVID-19 pandemic set the alarm bells ringing for Japan, which started to realise the closeness of China and the CEECs. When Europe experienced its first outbreak of COVID-19 in March 2020, the so-called mask diplomacy that China actively engaged in drew strong attention in and outside Europe. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić's remarks that 'European solidarity was a myth' and therefore 'Serbia now turns its eyes to China' (Euractive.com, 2021) were widely reported in Japan as well (Asahishinbun, 2021), as the words symbolised the closeness between China and certain parts of Europe. Furthermore, Hungary's approval of a vaccine made by China's Sinopharm, the first EU member state to do so, was also widely reported in Japan as an example of China's successful vaccine diplomacy (Nihonkeizaishinbun, 2021). Ironically, therefore, it was the outbreak of COVID-19 that arguably promoted awareness in Japan that it was China, not Japan, that the V4/CEECs saw as an important Asian partner at the time of crises. Gradually, the closeness between China and the V4/CEECs started gaining attention in Japan, and rather belatedly, the BRI developments in the V4/CEECs as well as the 16(17)+1 format started to be reported in detail in Japanese newspapers and on TV.

In this context, the series of visits to the V4/CEECs in 2021 by Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi reflects the change in Japan's mindset. In May this year, he visited Slovenia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, along with Poland for a bilateral and V4+Japan meeting. In July, he visited Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania after attending the G7 meeting. All these visits are useful for promoting and substantiating the common agendas of Japan and V4/CEEC.

Japan's acknowledgement of the importance of the V4/CEECs is undoubtedly a welcome development. However, it is important for Japan not to see its relations with the V4/CEECs narrowly in the context of its competition with China. What is vital for Japan is to thoroughly study the current needs of the V4/CEECs, consider what Japan can do to fulfil such needs, and set clear and concrete goals to be achieved in cooperation with those countries.

In this context, what Japan and Europe need to do is to jointly promote an alternative to the BRI in order to develop more sustainable, inclusive, and environmentally-friendly infrastructure. From this viewpoint, one of the promising ideas is to promote cooperation and coordination between the Japan-led Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) initiative and the Poland-led Three Seas Initiative (TSI). In September 2021, Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Zbigniew Rau contributed an article to the *Sankei Shinbun*, one of the major Japanese newspapers, where he argued in favour of close cooperation between FOIP and TSI, claiming that 'the security and development of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans are inextricably linked, and without stability in one there can be no stability in the other...FOIP and TSI have synergies'. He also claimed that 'Poland and Japan share the belief that only with the necessary economic strength and infrastructure can a comprehensive approach be taken that will provide an effective deterrent and defence against threats. There are countries, including both our partners, that have their sights set on provocations' (Rau, 2021). At the Japan-Poland foreign ministers' meeting in May 2021, Japan's Foreign Minister Motegi mentioned that the TSI was 'a meaningful endeavour which will promote the Japan-EU Connectivity Partnership and the unity of Europe', and expressed Japan's intention 'to consider ways in which Japan could become involved' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2021).

Taking account of the fact that the enthusiasm towards the TSI varies even within the V4 countries, it is vitally important for Japan to thoroughly study the postures of the other V4 members concerning what could actually be done in terms of FOIP-TSI cooperation, and whether it could lead to the revitalisation of the overall relationship between the V4 group and Japan. Nevertheless, this potential FOIP-TSI cooperation could pave the way for Japan to improve its understanding of the V4/CEECs and build a more robust relationship with them.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Since 2008, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan has also held the ‘Japan-Baltic Seminar’ with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania on annual bases, but this has rather been a series of expert meetings than policy consultation.
- 2 The Japanese Association for Russian and East European Studies (JAREES), established in 1971 and with 400 members belong to it, is a very active academic association with the focus on Slavic and East European Studies. See <https://www.jarees.jp/> for more information.
- 3 Japanese publications□ヴィクターセバステェン『ハンガリー革命』白水社、2008年；ヴィクターセバステェン『東欧革命1989 ソ連帝国の崩壊』白水社、2009年。
- 4 Japanese publications□イワンクラステフ『アフターヨーロッパ—ポピュリズムという妖怪にどう向きあうか』岩波書店、2018年；イワンクラステフ『模倣の罠—自由主義の没落』中央公論新社、2021年

- 5 Japanese publications □ アンアプルボーム 『鉄のカーテン——東欧の壊滅1944-56 (上) (下)』白水社、2019年; アンアプルボーム 『権威主義の誘惑——民主政治の黄昏』白水社、2021年
- 6 Lithuania declared its withdrawal from the 17+1 in May 2021. As of September 2021, therefore, there are 16 member countries from Europe that join this format.
- 7 CiNii (<https://ci.nii.ac.jp/en>), a bibliographic database service for material in Japanese academic libraries, shows that there are very few research papers and academic works on 16(17)+1 published before 2021. Furthermore, there were essentially no article on 16(17)+1 in the major Japanese newspapers until 2019.
- 8 For Japan's assistance to the CEECs, mainly to Hungary and Poland, see the address by the then Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu on 9 January 1999.