

# The revival of the Berlin-Tokyo Axis

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Japan ranked only 18th among Germany's trading partners last year, with a trade volume of €45.7 billion. Outside Europe, it ranked fourth. Germany's trade volume with China was more than six times higher and that with the United States more than five times higher, while that with Russia was slightly higher.

Despite this, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz traveled to Tokyo last weekend accompanied by six ministers and a high-ranking business delegation for the first German-Japanese government consultations. According to government circles, such consultations are reserved for "close and strategically important partners," which so far have included China. The chancellor had already visited Japan last April and will fly there again in May for the G7 summit. "Japanese-German relations are stronger and closer than ever," Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida stressed.

The rapprochement between the two countries evokes historical memories. The last time Germany and Japan were so closely allied was during World War II. The Anti-Comintern Pact of 1936 and the Three-Power Pact of 1940 made Japan, along with Italy, Nazi Germany's most important international allies. While the Nazis waged their murderous war of extermination against the Soviet Union, Japan conquered large parts of China and East Asia, committing bestial war crimes.

After their defeat in the war, both countries had to disarm. In its postwar constitution—formally still valid today—Japan renounced "for all time, war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes," as well as the maintenance of "land, naval and air forces or other means of war." Postwar West Germany's armed forces were limited, at least officially, to defensive tasks.

Japan and the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) resumed diplomatic relations in 1955, and trade and cultural exchanges developed from the 1970s onward. Politically, relations were largely free of tension but not particularly close. With the end of the Cold War, both countries began to shed their military restraint. The renewed rapprochement now comes at a time when they are abandoning all inhibitions and rearming massively.

The German-Japanese government consultations were dominated by the escalation of the Ukraine war against Russia and preparations for war against China. Whereas Germany had previously let its foreign policy in Asia be guided primarily by economic interests and maintained close relations with China, now military and political considerations and confrontation with China are taking centre stage.

Even the economic projects discussed and agreed upon in Tokyo were marked by war policy—or "security," as it is officially termed. Topics ranged from access to rare minerals and raw materials to securing supply chains and defending against cyberattacks. "We want to reduce dependencies and increase the resilience of our economies," Chancellor Scholz said.

Agreement had been reached on strengthening supply chains for minerals, semiconductors, batteries and other strategic areas to "counter economic coercion," Premier Kishida added, alluding to China, which is a leader in mining rare earth minerals for batteries and producing solar panels.

Kishida had already created the world's first Ministry of Economic Security after taking office in the fall of 2021. Then last year, Japan passed an economic security law that allows for far-reaching intervention in trade and business: securing supply chains for "strategic goods" such as semiconductors and medical products; keeping patents secret for technologies that can also be used for military purposes; establishing close cooperation between the state, universities and corporations in the development of critical technologies; and setting up state regulation of software in the infrastructure sector, targeting Chinese corporations, such as Huawei.

But German-Japanese cooperation is not limited to these issues. The governments also agreed to collaborate closely on military matters and defence production.

Both countries have more than doubled their arms budgets since the start of the Ukraine war a year ago. Germany has agreed to a special armaments fund of €100 billion and an immediate increase in the annual arms budget from 1.5 to 2 percent of GDP. The German government's stated goal is to

become “Europe’s leading military power.”

Japan plans to increase military spending of 43 trillion yen (€300 billion) by 2027 and to double its military budget from 1 to 2 percent of GDP. In December 2022, Tokyo released a new National Security Strategy that drops the last veneer of a “pacifist” constitution and prepares the country for war against China, which is described as an “unprecedented and greatest strategic challenge.”

The security strategy aims to rapidly acquire “counterstrike capabilities.” New fighter jets, medium-range missiles and other weapons are expected to enable the Japanese army to strike targets deep inside China.

This would open up new opportunities for closer cooperation, including in arms matters, German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius said in a press briefing. He cited submarine propulsion systems as an example. Of course, “Japan as a strong naval nation is also an interesting partner for us.”

In terms of military and armaments technology, both Japan and Germany have so far worked closely with the US, whose military capabilities exceed their own many times over. But both are seeking to break free from dependence on the victorious power of World War II.

While Germany seeks to bolster Europe’s arms production and military clout, Japan wants to revive its own defence industry after decades of restraint. In December, it agreed with Italy and the United Kingdom to jointly develop a new fighter aircraft—the first major defence collaboration without US involvement.

Joint military manoeuvres are also to take place more frequently in the future. Two years ago, the German warship Bayern stopped off in Japan on a voyage of several months through the Indo-Pacific, including the South China Sea. Last summer, six German Air Force Eurofighters participated in manoeuvres in Australia and visited Japan. Now, a legal framework is to be established for mutual logistical assistance and support, and once again a German Navy frigate will dock in Japan as a “commitment to freedom of the seas,” as Chancellor Scholz said. He was referring to those parts of the South China Sea claimed by China.

The extent to which a “new era” is also taking place in Germany’s Asia policy was confirmed on Tuesday by the first visit to Taiwan by a member of the German government in 26 years.

Research Minister Bettina Stark-Watzinger (Liberal Democrat, FDP) visited the island to discuss cooperation on semiconductors, electric car batteries, hydrogen and artificial intelligence. The visit, which Stark-Watzinger said was closely coordinated with the chancellor’s office and the foreign ministry, was regarded as a deliberate provocation

by Beijing. The Chinese Foreign Ministry protested sharply against this violation of the One China policy, to which Germany remains committed, at least in words.

The revival of the Berlin-Tokyo military axis confirms that NATO’s war in Ukraine is the prelude to a violent redivision of the world among the imperialist powers that will lead to a nuclear catastrophe if not stopped in time by a mass movement of the working class.

The Ukrainian war did not begin with Russia’s attack but with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and NATO’s systematic expansion eastward. Now, NATO is using the reactionary attack by the Putin regime to escalate the war. Its goal is not peace for Ukraine but the subjugation of Russia, with its huge reserves of raw materials, and the encirclement of China.

Japanese Prime Minister Kishida “spontaneously” traveled to Kiev immediately after the meeting with the German government to pay his respects to President Zelensky and demonstrate his full support for NATO’s war policy. He made a stopover in New Delhi to increase pressure on a reluctant Indian government to fully join the war front against Russia and China.

“You scratch my back, and I’ll scratch yours,” as the saying goes. Germany supports Japan, which is unwilling to accept China’s emergence as Asia’s dominant economic power; and Japan supports Germany, which sees the Ukraine war as an opportunity to emerge as Europe’s “leading power.”

It may seem a coincidence that Germany and Japan are allying once again. But geopolitics follows certain geographic patterns. Germany, as Europe’s dominant economic power, had sought to subjugate the continent during World War I and World War II; Japan forcibly subjugated large parts of East Asia for the same reason. Both eventually came into conflict with the United States, which would not allow competing world powers to emerge in Europe and East Asia.

The driving force behind the insane pro-war policy is the deep global crisis of capitalism, which became visible again in the recent banking crisis, and the escalation of the class struggle all over the world. As in the last century, the ruling class responds with war and dictatorship.



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