

# Japan and Europe in the Mena (Middle East and North Africa) area: Towards a New Bilateral Agenda?

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## Introduction

The 2000s witnessed attempts to strengthen the Japan-EU relations through an expansion of bilateral cooperative endeavours. Indeed, many of the ambitious goals set by the Hague Declaration (1991) are still far from being accomplished. Yet, in the last twenty years, the two actors have managed to extend the cooperation to new sectors, such as environment, Central Asia and energy.<sup>1</sup> As I will try to argue in this paper, the Middle East and North Africa (Mena) area is likely to become a promising ground of cooperation between the two actors and a powerful factor that will further strengthen Japan and the EU's role as shapers of global governance.

Indeed, a joint EU-Japan action in this area was already envisaged in the "Action Plan for Japan-EU Cooperation" (2001). The Plan suggested that, "as regards the Middle East Peace Process, the EU and Japan will continue to support any efforts to find a peaceful solution to the conflict built on the general principles of international law, UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, and particularly the formula 'Land for Peace' as well as the agreements of Madrid and Oslo".<sup>2</sup> Binding as it may seem, this pledge did not result in a significant bilateral dialogue. The Middle East peace process occupies a central place in both Japan and EU's agenda,<sup>3</sup> but the two actors have not hitherto strove to seriously engage in a bilateral diplomatic action. Moreover, the very fact that this issue had been included in the section "other actions to be pursued" suggests that the crisis was perceived as being less pressing than other "specific regional issues", such as tensions on the Korean peninsula and the Balkan region.

More recent documents -notably the joint statement released on the occasion of the 20<sup>th</sup> Japan-EU bilateral summit- have recalled the importance of Japan-EU cooperation in this area. EU and Japan have pledged to enhance "joint efforts to support the economic and social development of the Palestinian people". Japan, in particular, has decided to contribute to the EU's PEGASE mechanism. Besides this, the two actors made a joint pledge to cooperate for the safety of maritime navigation off the coast of Somalia and in the Gulf of Aden. In Afghanistan, the EU and Japan are committed to continue to pursue cooperation on security, reintegration, and development assistance including the establishment of a police training centre in light of the transfer of security responsibility from international to the Afghan National Security Forces.<sup>4</sup> The EU and Japan have also co-hosted a conference on "Tajikistan-Afghanistan border management and trade facilitation" on October 7-8 2011 in Dushanbe.

As I will explain in the following pages, in the near future, the Mena area related issues will be of mutual and urgent importance for both Japan and the EU and this will prompt the two actors to go beyond the

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<sup>1</sup> See Julie Gilson, "Drifting Apart? Japan-EU Relations", in Alisa Gaunder (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Japanese Politics*, London and New York, 2011, p. 355.

<sup>2</sup> See, "An Action Plan for EU-Japan Cooperation", Bruxelles, 2001, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/eu/summit/action0112.html> (Accessed February 3, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> For the EU's position, see, for instance, "A Secure Europe in a Better World. European Security Strategy", 12 December 2003, <http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/solanae.pdf> (Accessed February 3, 2012), p. 13; for Japan's position, see, for instance, "Chūtō wahei ni tsuite no Nihon no tachiba" November 24 2010, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/middleeast/tachiba.html> (Accessed February 3, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> See "20th EU-Japan Summit Brussels, 28 May 2011 Joint Press Statement" <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/eu/joint1105.html> (Accessed February 3, 2012).

limited scope of the ad hoc initiatives that have been conceived so far. Indeed, the strategic map of the Middle East/Mediterranean has considerably changed in the last years. The end of the Cold war has altered the overall balance of power, which had hitherto been influenced by superpower bipolarity. The collapse of the Soviet Union provided the United States and the EU with a new regional setting, urging the two actors to reconfigure their strategic role. After 1991, two different visions of the Mediterranean region emerged: the so called “Greater Middle East”, advocated by the United States, and the Euro-Mediterranean space conceptualised by Europe. The latter envisions the Mediterranean region as the Southern periphery *par excellence* and it targets the instability of the Southern bank as a key security issue for the European Union, providing an institutional framework (the Euro-Mediterranean partnership) to address the interregional dialogue. Conversely, the “Greater Middle East” political project locates the geopolitical centre of gravity of the region in the Persian Gulf, conceiving the Mediterranean space as a strategic corridor intended to project US power in the region. The terrorist attacks –which lead the United States to wage a war against the Taliban regime and to invade Iraq-, have further strengthened the divergence between Europe and the United States. In particular, the US lead war in Iraq alienated important US allies, showing that a compromise between European and US policy in the Mena area is not a viable option. As it has been argued, the two geopolitical visions do not even allow a “transatlantic division of labour” as this postulates a strategic decoupling of Maghreb/Western Mediterranean region from the Maghreb/Middle East/Persian Gulf area which is patently at odds with the globalising process under way in the region.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, new external actors have recently joined Europe and the United States as relevant players in the Mena area. In the last decade, Asia’s footprint in the Middle East has deepened, leading to an increased regional involvement of India, as well as China and Japan. Economic interests, energy related needs as well as geostrategic concerns, urged China and Japan to strengthen their presence in the Mediterranean region and in the Middle East. In commercial terms, China has increased investment in the commercial shipping and in the ship-building market. A good example of this policy is the purchase of the deep-water pier access in the Greek port of Piraeus, through the state-owned company Cosco. In military terms, China’s increased presence in the area is exemplified by task group deployments of the Chinese navy to the Horn of Africa and to Libya.<sup>6</sup> Besides this recent upgrading of its naval strategy, China has shown an unprecedented diplomatic activism in Africa and in the Middle East. Although less investigated, Tokyo’s engagement in the Mena area has become remarkable too. As I will explain in the following section, since 2001 Japan became noticeably proactive in this region. Besides the conspicuous contribution to the reconstruction of Iraq and Afghanistan, the involvement in the BMENA (Broader Middle East) initiative and a more effective engagement in North Africa, Japan has steadily contributed to anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia.

The regional environment brought forth by these momentous changes has created unprecedented opportunities for Japan and the European Union to cooperate. Moreover, the Arab spring and the emergence of piracy activities off the coast of Somalia have made even more compelling the case for a deeper consultation between the EU and Japan on Mena area related issues. The outcome of the series of popular revolts, which began in Tunisia at the end of 2010, will have influential implications for both Europe and Japan in the economic as well as in the security realm. On the other hand, as I will explain later on, effective and long-lasting counter-piracy activities require Europe and Japan to envisage a comprehensive framework

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<sup>5</sup> Fabio Petito, Elisabetta Brighi (eds), “Introduction”, *Il Mediterraneo nelle relazioni internazionali*, Milan: Vita & Pensiero, 2009, p. XVI.

<sup>6</sup> Lee Willet, “Pirates and Power Politics. Naval Presence and Grand Strategy in the Horn of Africa”, *The Rusi Journal*, vol. 156, no. 6 (December 2011), p. 24.

that goes beyond the scope of the so far implemented ad hoc cooperation.

In the following pages, I will elaborate on the rationale for a new bilateral agenda based on a joint Japan-EU diplomatic activity in the Mena area. Indeed, the issue has mutual implications. Japan's increased interest in the Mediterranean/Middle East is only one side of the coin: the other side being the new developments in the EU's strategic approach to the region, with particular reference to the Somali piracy problem. It would be lengthy to investigate all the manifold aspects of the subject, so in this article I will focus on Japan's side of the issue. In the first section, I will conduct a survey of Tokyo's diplomatic activity in the region, in the last decade. Touching on the most significant Japanese initiatives, I will attempt to clarify how and why Japanese diplomacy in the Mediterranean/Middle East has intensified. I will then move to analyze the impact that "Arab spring" and piracy are exerting on Europe and Japan's diplomacy, emphasizing why these two issues could prompt EU-Japan cooperation. Finally, some preliminary conclusions will be drawn, mainly with the objective of paving the way for future research on the very same issue, and contributing to the ongoing debate with some new ideas and conceptual frameworks of analysis.

Before going to the body of the article, one point has to be clarified. The geographical definition of the Mediterranean space, and more broadly of the Mena area, is not beyond dispute. Different geographical definitions have been used as theoretical validation of different strategic visions of the region.<sup>7</sup> In this article, I will conform to the geographical designation of the Mena area that is currently used by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. According to the Gaimushō's understanding, the "Middle East and North Africa region" (*Chūtō to Kita Afurika chiiki*) stretches from the Northern part of Africa to the Persian Gulf, incorporating the Middle East. Afghanistan is the easternmost border of the area, whilst Pakistan is not included.<sup>8</sup>

## The rationale for a new bilateral agenda

### a) Japan's proactive diplomacy in the Mena area

Japan's endeavours in the Mena area have been often described in terms of "resource diplomacy" (*shigen gaikō*), that is a diplomacy aimed at securing access to raw materials and energy sources.<sup>9</sup> More specifically, this definition has been applied to Japan's diplomatic activity in the Middle East, the area of the region where Tokyo's core interests coalesce. The Middle East has been mainly perceived as a supplier of resources and a market for Japan's industrial output. Indeed, vital reasons led Japan to pursue such diplomacy. The "economics-first" policy that Japan has adopted within the normative framework of the Yoshida Doctrine, postulated an unproblematic access to the energy resources that were necessary to economic growth, oil being the chief one. The 1973 oil crisis dramatically reminded Japan of its vulnerability vis-à-vis the Middle East. A remarkable effort to rationalize and diversify the energy sources was carried on, and the concept of "comprehensive security" (*sōgō anzen hoshō*) was spelled out to suggest that the implementation of security did not only require to shield Japan from military threats, but also to make sure that the country could have

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<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Franco Mazzei (ed.), "Il Mediterraneo, geopolitica della diversità", *World Politics. Appunti e riflessioni sulla politica mondiale*, Naples: L'Orientale Editrice, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> This geographical definition has been systematically used in the Diplomatic Bluebook edited by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs since the 2004 edition. See, for instance, the Mena area map included in the last edition. Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ed.), *Gaikō seisho 2011*, [http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/2011/pdf/pdfs/2\\_6.pdf](http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/2011/pdf/pdfs/2_6.pdf), p. 102 (Accessed February 9, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Glenn D. Hook, Julie Gilson, Christopher W. Hughes, Hugo Dobson, *Japan's International Relations. Politics, Economics and Security*, London and New York: Routledge, 2011, p. 30.

free access to raw materials and energy sources.<sup>10</sup> Despite the effective policy adjustments that took place on the wake of the two oil crises (1973; 1979) and notwithstanding the launch of “Japan’s Eurasian Diplomacy” (1997) –that was in part conceived to diversify the risks involved by Tokyo’s Middle East driven energy strategy<sup>11</sup> - Tokyo’s dependence on oil imports from the Arab countries is still impressive (90% of crude oil is imported from this area).

Japan has historically pursued three main objectives in the Middle East. First, increasing economic links with the oil producing countries of the region -mainly on a bilateral basis. Second, mitigating geopolitical risks that could jeopardise the stability of the region. Third, assuring the security of the sea routes connecting the Middle East to Japan. These objectives are still a relevant part of Japan’s regional diplomacy in the Mena area. Yet, an incremental –albeit conspicuous- change in Japan’s diplomacy can be observed since 2001. First of all, Japan has intensified its diplomatic activity in the region. Tokyo’s initiatives have increased as it is demonstrated, for instance, by the proliferation of Japan lead fora that has taken place in the 2000s. The Japan-Arab Dialogue Forum (2003), the Japan-Arab Conference (2007) and the Japan-Arab Economic Forum (2009) are some of them. These initiatives- that were conceived to foster cooperation and mutual understanding between Japan and the Arab world- provide also good evidence of how concerned Tokyo is about relying on economic resources to enhance its soft power. The title of the first Japan-Arab conference –which was held in Alexandria on the 20-21 November 2007- is quite illuminating in this respect: “New dawn: Arabs looking East”.<sup>12</sup> The key idea behind the theme of the Conference was that the Arab countries should learn from the “East Asia miracle”, and the Japanese economic model. An idea that Japan had promoted in other regional contexts as well (e. g. Africa and Central Asia).

Japan’s diplomatic activism has also been noticeable within multilateral frameworks, such as the BMENA initiative. The initiative was launched in June 2004, at the G-8 summit held at Sea Island (United States). The aim of this multilateral action is to foster cooperation between the G8 industrialized nations and countries of the MENA area, concentrating efforts in three main domains: politics (free and transparent elections, capacity building for assemblies, promotion of women’s participation in politics and society, legal reforms, safeguarding freedom of expression); society and culture (enhancing quality of education, improving access to textbooks, improving digital knowledge); economy (vocational training, fostering small and medium-sized enterprises, facilitating remittances from abroad, removing barriers to investment, support for accession to WTO, etc). Japan’s role within the initiative has been substantial as it is exemplified by two relevant projects sponsored by Tokyo: a joint workshop on vocational training which was proposed and jointly organized by Jordan and Japan (September 2005); donation of aid in the area of vocational training and a contribution of US\$10 million aimed at supporting medium- and small-scale enterprises in the region.<sup>13</sup>

Secondly, since 2001 a slight change in the means used by Japan can be observed. Until 2001, Tokyo had pursued a diplomacy that was mainly based on economic means and it was, in essence, developmentally focused. Japan used aid for development and other “checkbox diplomacy” resources to exert its power in

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<sup>10</sup> See *Sōgō anzen hoshō Kenkyū grūpu hōkokusho* (Report of the Research Committee on Comprehensive Security), available at <http://www.ioc.u-tokyo.ac.jp/~worldjpn/documents/texts/JPSC/19800702.O1J.html> (Accessed February 11, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> See Christopher Len, Uyama Tomohiko, Hirose Tetsuya (eds.), *Japan’s Silk-road Diplomacy: Paving the Road Ahead*, Washington, Stockholm: Central Asia Caucasus Institute & Silk-Road Studies Program, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> The first Japan-Arab Conference and other initiatives are introduced respectively in the 2008 edition, 2004 edition and 2010 edition of the Diplomatic Bluebook edited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. See Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ed.), *Gaikō seisho* 2008, [http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/2008/pdf/pdfs/2\\_6.pdf](http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/2008/pdf/pdfs/2_6.pdf), p. 96; Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ed.), *Gaikō seisho* 2004, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/2004/hakusho/h16/index.html>; Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ed.), *Gaikō seisho* 2010, [http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/2010/pdf/pdfs/2\\_6.pdf](http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/2010/pdf/pdfs/2_6.pdf), p. 91.

<sup>13</sup> See Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ed.), *Japan’s Official Development Assistance White Paper 2007*, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/white/2007/ODA2007/html/zuhyo/zu020381.htm> (Accessed February 7, 2012).

the region. In so doing, Tokyo managed to mitigate its vulnerability within the asymmetrical relationship with the countries in the region. The effectiveness of this economic diplomacy has been so great that Joseph Nye indicates the case of Japan as a good example of how fallacious it can be to equate a rich endowment in natural resources with economic power. Whilst Japan managed to become the second richest country in the world in the twentieth century without considerable natural resources, some of the well-endowed countries –oil producers among them- did not manage to turn their natural resources into national wealth or power.<sup>14</sup>

After 2001 Japan continued to rely mainly on economic based diplomacy as it is exemplified by the steady ODA flow to the Mena area countries in the last decade. Despite the economic difficulties and the declining domestic support for overseas international contribution, Japan's commitment remained considerable.<sup>15</sup> Yet alongside economic diplomacy, Japan has intermittently resorted to non-economic means. Such a new approach can be seen, for instance, in Japan's involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq. Originally relegated at the margins of Japan's diplomacy, after 2001 this area gained relevance within Tokyo's vision. Some authors argue that Japan's engagement in the two countries is but the result of bandwagoning with the US and this will expose Tokyo to the risk of a permanent entanglement.<sup>16</sup> It is undeniable that bilateralism played a decisive role in Tokyo's decision to join the "War on terror". Nonetheless, Japanese endeavours appear to be also driven by the acknowledgement that the stability of the Middle East is closely tied to the stability of Afghanistan and Iraq. Once again, Japan's presence in the region has been developmentally oriented, but in this case the means to achieve the regional objectives were not exclusively economy-based. Beside ODA, Japan has contributed to the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq through Self Defence Forces (SDF) personnel, providing logistical support to coalition forces in the Indian Ocean (2001) and in the South of Iraq (2004). Interestingly enough, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has labelled Japanese policy in Iraq the "two wheels of one cart strategy" (*sha no ryōrin*),<sup>17</sup> meaning that the two policies could not be thought of separately. Moreover, Japan has abandoned its traditionally low profile approach, opting for an active and leading role in the reconstruction operations. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the second international conference for the reconstruction of Afghanistan was held in Tokyo on the 21 and 22 of January 2002.

One more interesting case is the "Corridor for Peace and Prosperity" (*Heiwa to han'ei no kairo/Jeriko nō sangyō danchi*) which was presented on the occasion of Prime Minister Koizumi's visit to the Middle East in 2006. The project aims to assist the development of the Jordan River Rift Valley through regional cooperation, involving Israel, the Palestinian Authority and Jordan. As the denomination reveals, the plan is profoundly inspired by the "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" (*Jiyū to han'ei no ko*) policy, which was launched in November 2006, in a speech given by then Foreign Minister Asō.<sup>18</sup> The Corridor had been originally conceived as a crucial element of the Arc that would start from Northern Europe and traverse the

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<sup>14</sup> See Joseph S. Nye, *The Future of Power*, New York: Public Affairs, 2011, p. 62.

<sup>15</sup> In 2009, bilateral ODA to MENA countries was approximately 500.67 millions US\$ on a net disbursement basis. Indeed this amount is meagre when compared with the correspondent figure for 2008 (US\$2,371.73 million) and 2007 (US\$948.98 million), but it is nonetheless considerable in the light of the cuts in ODA that Japan has implemented in the last ten years. See, respectively Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ed.), *Japan's ODA White paper 2008*, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/white/2008/part3-2-3.pdf>, p. 114; Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ed.), *Japan's ODA White paper 2009*, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/white/2009/pdfs/part2-2-3.pdf>, p. 86; Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ed.), *Japan's ODA White paper 2010*, p. 102, [http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/white/2010/pdfs/10\\_part3-2-3.pdf](http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/white/2010/pdfs/10_part3-2-3.pdf) (Accessed 10 February 2012).

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Miyata Osamu, *Chūtō kiki no naka no Nihon gaikō. Bōsō suru Amerika to Iran no hazama de* (Japanese Foreign Policy in the Middle East. Between Iran and Reckless America), Tokyo: NHK Shuppan, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ed.), *Gaikō seisho 2005*, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/2005/index1.html> (Accessed February 10, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> Asō Tarō, "Jiyū to han'ei no ko wo tsukuru. Hirogaru Nihon gaikō no chihei" (Building an Arc of Freedom and Prosperity. Japanese Foreign Policy's expanding Horizons), [http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/enzetsu/18/easo\\_1130.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/enzetsu/18/easo_1130.html) (Accessed February 10, 2012).

Baltic States, Central and South Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Caucasus, the Middle East, and the Indian subcontinent, then cross Southeast Asia finally to reach Northeast Asia. The arc was aimed at creating “a region of stability and plenty with its basis in universal values” (i.e. freedom, democracy, fundamental human rights, the rule of law and the market economy).<sup>19</sup> This policy has been progressively dismissed and the normative framework associated with the Corridor has been replaced by a more conventional value-free approach. Yet, even so, the Corridor marks a detour from the Japanese diplomatic patterns as it sets aside Tokyo’s privileged bilateral approach in favour of a multilateral one. Indeed, the project’s objectives have been so far achieved not only through the essential channelling of Japanese ODA, but also thanks to Tokyo’s ability to exert leadership within an extremely sensitive political environment such as the one peculiar to the Corridor project.<sup>20</sup>

Overall, in the last ten years, the Mena area has become more important in Japanese diplomacy. This is also demonstrated by the substantial reform of the “Middle Eastern and African Affairs Bureau” (*Chūtō Afurika kyoku*) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which has been implemented in April 2001. Within this bureau a new section was established in charge of dealing with 48 countries of Sub-Saharan Africa. This choice was inspired by the acknowledgment of Africa’s growing importance, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, by the recognition of the need to unitedly address the issues related to the Middle East and North Africa region. Not surprisingly, the first and the second “Middle East division” (*Chūtō daiikka*, *Chūtō dainika*) which were set up as a result of this administrative reshuffle, are in charge of the very countries belonging to the so called Mena region. Even more interestingly, three years later, the denomination “Middle East and North Africa” (*Chūtō to Kita Afurika*) was officially adopted in the Diplomatic Bluebook (*Gaikō seisho*) edited by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the 2004 edition, the denomination “Mena” appears for the first time, replacing the separate denominations “Middle East” and “Africa” which had hitherto been used to title the chapter dealing with Middle East and African Affairs.<sup>21</sup> These organizational changes were accompanied by a factual broadening of Japan’s diplomatic scope. In the last ten years, Tokyo has fully included in its diplomatic agenda areas that so far had not been very relevant, such as North Africa. Historically, countries located in the Northern part of Africa have played a peripheral role within Japanese regional diplomacy, the Middle East being the real centre of Tokyo’s interests. Yet, since 2003, an increased concern for North Africa can be observed which has been heralded by a series of diplomatic “firsts”. In 2003, Kawaguchi visited Egypt and Tunisia. In the case of Tunisia, the visit was the first one ever paid to the country by a Japanese foreign minister. On December 2004, for the first time, an Algerian President visited Japan and in December 2010, Foreign Minister Maehara Seiji was the first Foreign Minister to visit Algeria, since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries (1962).

Another sign of Japan’s will to make more inclusive its regional diplomacy in the

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<sup>19</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ed.), *Diplomatic Bluebook 2007*, p. 2,

<http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/2007/chapter1.pdf> (Accessed February 10, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> The project goals that have been achieved so far include: the drafting of a plan for the comprehensive development of the Jericho governorate (August 2006); the negotiation of an agreement among the four partners for the construction of a farmers housing complex in the southern part of the Jericho governorate (August 2008); the production of a feasibility study aimed at gathering necessary information for the development of an agro industrial park and the building of a distribution centre (November 2008). For further details, see, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ed.), *Gaikō seisho 2011*, [http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/2011/pdf/pdfs/2\\_6.pdf](http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/2011/pdf/pdfs/2_6.pdf), p. 105 (Accessed February 10, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> For the administrative reconfiguration of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ Middle Eastern and African Affairs Bureau, see <http://www.mofa.go.jp/annai/honsho/sosiki/chuto.html> (Accessed August 22, 2012); for the introduction of the denomination *Chūtō to Kita Afurika* in the Diplomatic Bluebook, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ed.), *Gaikō seisho 2003*, “Dai roku setsu” (*Chūtō*), “Dai nana setsu” (*Afurika*) <http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/2003/gaikou/html/honpen/index.html>; Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ed.), *Gaikō seisho 2004*, “Dai roku setsu” (*Chūtō to Kita Afurika*), <http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/2004/hakusho/h16/index.html> (Accessed February 12, 2012).

Mediterranean/Middle East is the “Kono initiative”, which was launched in 2001, by Foreign Minister Kono Yōhei on the occasion of his visit to the countries of Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. This cooperative framework –aimed at fostering Japan’s diplomacy with the Gulf countries in the long term through personnel and cultural exchanges- is based on three main pillars: the promotion of dialogue with the Islamic world, the development of water resources and environmental cooperation, and the promotion of a wide-ranging policy dialogue.<sup>22</sup> The start of Free Trade Agreement negotiations with the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC), in 2006, can be considered an interesting spill-over of Japan’s greater interest in the region.

Finally, it is noteworthy that, over the last ten years, Tokyo has taken a more proactive role in Mena surrounding areas as well. Japan’s relations with African countries have consistently improved since 2000, when Prime Minister Mori Yoshirō –renowned for his efforts to promote “human security”- invited three African head of states (President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, and President Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria) at the G-8 Summit in Okinawa. The subsequent visits that Mori paid in South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria (2001) further contributed to enhance Japanese diplomatic relations with Sub-Saharan African countries. Japanese politicians’ individual endeavours aside, in the 2000s Africa was granted a central place in Japanese agenda. This was chiefly accomplished through the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD), a multilateral initiative launched by Tokyo, in 1993, to promote high-level policy dialogue between African leaders and their partners and mobilizing support for African-owned development initiatives.<sup>23</sup> Over the years, Japan’s role within TICAD conference has become more conspicuous, “revealing a will to exert leadership”.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the very decision to convene the conference can be considered indicative of Tokyo’s intention to directly exert a strategic leverage in the Sub-Saharan Africa, dismissing the low-profile attitude that had hitherto marked its approach to African issues.

#### b) New challenges confronting Europe and Japan: Somali piracy and the Arab spring.

The state of Somalia failed in 1991, and consequently piracy has taken place in the area of the Horn of Africa. The phenomenon has turned into a more relevant issue since 2006, when a remarkable rise in the number of incidents has been observed. According to the International Maritime Bureau (IMB), in 2006, eighteen incidents occurred in the region; in 2009 the number had risen to 148; in 2010, 100 cases were recorded, whereas in the first half of 2011 there were 163 incidents. These incidents accounted for about 60% of the global total.<sup>25</sup> In late 2011, this issue came again to the forefront of politics following some impressive pirate attacks, such as the seizure of the chemical tanker *Liquid Velvet* in the Internationally Recommended Transit Corridor in the Gulf of Aden, on 31 October 2011, and the retaking of the scrap metal ship *Montecristo* by a Nato led force.

The international community’s response to piracy attacks off the Somali coasts has entered a proactive stage in 2008, after the Security Council adopted resolutions 1846 and 1851.<sup>26</sup> These resolutions,

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<sup>22</sup> See “Policy Address by Minister of Foreign Affairs Kono Yohei (Subtitle: Toward Multi-layered Relations with the Gulf Countries)”, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/russia/fmv0101/fmspeech.html> (Accessed February 8, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> The first conference was held in 1993 and it was followed by the subsequent meetings summoned in 1998, 2003 and 2008. For a thorough survey of the subject, see Bert Edström, *Japan and the TICAD Process*, Stockholm: Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2010, pp. 6-38.

<sup>24</sup> See Bert Edström, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> See Martin N Murphy, “Somali Piracy. Why Should we care?”, *The Rusi Journal*, vol. 156, no. 6 (December 2011), p. 9.

<sup>26</sup> See Resolution n. 1851 (2008), adopted by the Security Council at the 6046<sup>th</sup> meeting on 16 December 2008,

under the authorisation of the Somali Transitional Federal Government, allowed non-Somali ships to enforce piracy laws in Somali waters. In the 1851 resolution the relevant States and international organisations were encouraged to work together against piracy off the Somali coast, and to widen their capacity to deal with this, also on a judicial level. On the basis of this resolution, on 14 January 2009, the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia was established to coordinate actions among states and organizations in order to combat piracy. Membership in the Contact Group includes 46 States and seven international organizations.

Pursuant to these resolutions, the European Union made the first move to address the piracy problem. On 8 December 2008, operation *Atlanta* was launched, within the framework of the European Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The EU Naval Force operates within an area of 2.000.000 square nautical miles that stretches from the south of the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden to the Western part of the Indian Ocean, including the Seychelles. The operation is aimed at assuring the protection of vessels of the World Food Programme delivering food to displaced persons in Somalia as well as the protection of the African Union Mission on Somalia shipping; besides, EU Navfor conducts the deterrence, prevention and repression of acts of piracy and armed robbery off the Somali coast, the protection of vulnerable shipping on a case by case basis and it contributes to the monitoring of fishing activities in the same area. The participation of EU-Navfor operation Atlanta goes beyond EU members states including, for instance, Norway, Croatia, Ukraine and Montenegro.<sup>27</sup> Some EU members have been particularly active in counter-piracy operations in the area. The UK which has long term interests in the region provides the staffing infrastructure for EU NAVFOR and the location for the single Nato operational command headquarters. France, on the other hand, has played a key role in creating the EU NAVFOR, it has set up an Indian Ocean Fleet and it has conducted national task deployments such as Operation Agapanthus in October 2010. In 2009, in addition to the existing base in Djibouti, Paris has founded a military base in Abu Dhabi.<sup>28</sup>

The United States followed quickly, establishing the coalition Task Force 151 under the Combined Maritime Force Structure, in January 2009. Nato deployed its Standing Nato Maritime Group 2 to the region and it subsequently established the operation *Ocean Shield* as a permanent counter-piracy task group.<sup>29</sup> Other countries, such as China, India and Russia dispatched units to the Indian Ocean, demonstrating how relevant the piracy issue is on the political ground as well.

As for Japan, its commitment to counter piracy has been considerable. Alongside patrolling activities, Japan steadily sought to contribute to the stability and security of Somalia granting aid for development.<sup>30</sup> The presence of the Japanese navy in the Horn of Africa dates back to March 2009, when Japan dispatched two vessels in the area in order to escort Japanese-registered ships, foreign-registered ships with Japanese on board and foreign-registered ships operated by Japanese ship transportation companies or transporting Japanese cargo. In addition to this operation, two P-3C patrol aircraft were dispatched to the Republic of Djibouti on May 28 for the mission of anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia and in the Gulf of Aden. In July 2011, the patrolling mission was extended until July the 23<sup>rd</sup> 2012. 2009 saw also the approval of the “Law to combat piracy” that provided Japan with more effective normative means to combat

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<http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N08/655/01/PDF/N0865501.pdf?OpenElement> ; resolution n. 1846 (2008), adopted by the Security Council at the 6026<sup>th</sup> meeting on 2 December 2008,

<http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N08/630/29/PDF/N0863029.pdf?OpenElement> (Accessed January 28, 2012).

<sup>27</sup> See, EU NAVFOR SOMALIA, <http://www.eunavfor.eu/about-us/mission> (Accessed January 27, 2012).

<sup>28</sup> See Lee Willet, pp. 22-3.

<sup>29</sup> See Lee Willet, p. 21.

<sup>30</sup> From 2007 to January 2012, Japan’s humanitarian assistance to Somalia amounted to approximately US\$ 124.4 million dollars. See, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Somaria oki Aden wan no kaizoku mondai no genjō to torikumi” (The present situation in the Gulf of Aden and off the Somali coast and our involvement), <http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/pirate/africa.html> (Accessed January 27, 2012).



pirate activity.<sup>31</sup> Finally, in order to allow the Japanese Self Defence Forces to work autonomously in the region, on the 7<sup>th</sup> of July 2011 a base operated by Maritime Self Defence Forces (MSDF) was inaugurated in Djibouti.<sup>32</sup>

This unprecedented decision can be considered a relevant indicator of the crucial role that Somali piracy is likely to play in the Japanese diplomatic agenda. From a technical perspective, Japan's choice to open a facility in Djibouti is just the reasonable application of historical evidence: navies have rarely been able to effectively dissuade aggressors at sea alone. Accordingly, the establishment of a base is a necessary prerequisite for successful counter-piracy activities.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, patrolling the sea lanes and escorting vessels are the only objectives of the MSDF personnel based in Djibouti. Yet, the establishment of the facility has implications that go beyond these practical aspects, because of the historic meaning of Tokyo's decision. The opening of the base can be considered the most recent stage of a process that has eroded the antimilitaristic norm underpinning Japanese diplomacy. After the Cold war ended, Japan equipped itself with legal and operational devices that made the country better prepared to act in its own defence. According to R. Samuels, the dismissal of the astensionistic principle embedded in the Yoshida Doctrine was implemented resorting to a "salami slicing" technique, that is through "a series of discrete steps" that "has given Japanese strategists new confidence and increased comfort in assuming additional roles and mission".<sup>34</sup> The Peace Keeping Operation Law (1992), the 2001 and 2003 ad hoc laws that enabled Japanese SDF to take part to the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq and the transformation of the Defence Agency into Ministry of Defence (2006) have been crucial steps of this incremental progression. It is significant that the culminating part of the process and accordingly the momentous decision to break a long-lasting taboo (i.e. establishing an overseas base) was driven by strategic concerns arousing from the Mena area.

Alongside Somali piracy, the so called Arab spring could provide a new compelling case for a deeper cooperation between Japan and the EU. The timing of the upheavals that have swept North Africa has dramatically overlapped with the aftermath of the triple catastrophe that hit Japan on March 11 2011. This unfortunate coincidence can be considered responsible for Japan's low profile response. Tokyo has joined other countries in releasing declarations supportive of reforms in the Mena area.<sup>35</sup> Besides this, the Japanese government has pledged to promote reform and transitions efforts of the concerned countries through the implementation of actions aimed at developing fair political process, human resources, as well as to foster industries.<sup>36</sup>

The long-term implications of the uprisings unfolding across the Middle East are not yet completely clear. Nonetheless, it is without doubt that the Arab revolts confront external actors with the task of adjusting their local diplomacy to the changed regional scenario and with the opportunity to contribute to the ongoing institution building process in the Middle East/Mediterranean area. Europe and Japan are in the position to

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<sup>31</sup> The law was approved on June 24 2009. See "Kaizoku kōi no shobatsu oyobi kaizoku kōi e no taisho ni kan suru hōristu" (Law for the tackling and the punishment of piracy activities), <http://law.e-gov.go.jp/htmldata/H21/H21HO055.html> (Accessed February 11, 2012).

<sup>32</sup> See Ministry of Defense (ed.), "Establishment of a Facility for Counter-piracy Mission in Djibouti", *Japan Defense Focus*, no. 23, October 2011, <http://www.mod.go.jp/e/jdf/no23/topics01.html> (Accessed February 11, 2012).

<sup>33</sup> See Martin N. Murphy, p. 7.

<sup>34</sup> See R. Samuels, *Securing Japan. Tokyo's Grand Strategy and the Future of Asia*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007, p. 107.

<sup>35</sup> See, for instance, the declaration released on occasion of the G8 summit at Deauville, 26 May 2011, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Japan Will Support Middle Eastern & North African Countries' Reform & Transition Efforts", <http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/jfpu/2011/6/0611.html> (Accessed January 30 2011).

<sup>36</sup> For a more detailed account of Japan's intervention, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Japan's Engagement with Mena Countries*, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/jfpu/2011/6/pdfs/0611.pdf> (Accessed February 10 2012); Sakai Kazunari, "Arabū no haru" to Nihon no gaikō" ("Arab Spring" and Japanese Diplomacy), <http://nippon.com/ja/currents/d10001/>.

play an influential role. Indeed, the two actors share with the United States a lack of credibility due to the long-time support for the dictators that have been toppled out by the recent upheavals. Despite the joint commitment to “freedom, democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights and sustainable development”,<sup>37</sup> a trade-off between stability and democracy has been the tacit premise of EU and Japan regional diplomacy in the Mena area in the last decades. The United States has been no exception to this rule. Yet, unlike the United States, EU and Japan can count on a reliability asset stemming from their shared status of “civilian powers”. In approaching the Mena area, the two actors’ diplomacy has privileged economic and cultural leverages. Besides this, because of its past non-colonizer status, Japan can count on a further advantage. In fact, the Mena region shows more than any other sector, that the “like-mindedness” -often recalled in Japan-EU joint press statements- is real and could be a powerful policy instrument.

### *Conclusions*

The time is ripe for listing the Mena area as a new item of cooperation in the Japan-EU bilateral agenda. Indeed, Japan’s shift to a proactive diplomacy in the Mena area and the emergence of a compelling threat such as Somali piracy do not automatically lead to a joint Japan-EU effort in the region. Nor will the Arab spring necessarily elicit a shared interregional perspective on Mediterranean/Middle East affairs. Yet, these factors have urged Japan to reconfigure its regional policy and, at the same time, they have strengthened the convergence between EU and Japanese interests in the region.

As I have previously stressed, the Middle East has been and still is a top priority in Japan’s foreign policy. The “Diplomatic Bluebook” editions yearly recall that the region occupies a “geopolitically important location”; it has “important shipping lanes for international commerce, and furthermore, supplies large quantities of oil and natural gas”. For these reasons –the Bluebook concludes- peace and stability of the region are imperative for Japan which imports approximately 90% of its crude oil from this region.<sup>38</sup> The large scale anti-government demonstrations that swept North Africa in 2010 have jeopardised Tokyo’s interests, reminding Japan of the strategic relevance of the region. More precisely, these factors have impacted on a process that has already been under way since 2001, as a result of the Afghanistan war, China’s diplomatic activism and the emergence of Somali piracy. The shift in Japanese regional diplomacy in the Mena area –which I have investigated in the second section of this paper-, can be considered the outcome of Japan’s successful adaptation to the new regional environment brought forth by these three factors.

As I have already mentioned, the war in Afghanistan and its escalation into the Af-Pak issue have dramatically impacted on the Mena area, producing a severe increase to the geopolitical risk. Because of its geographical proximity with Tokyo’s main providers of oil, the instability of the area has considerably threatened Japanese energy security policies. This has prompted Japan to shift from a low profile diplomacy merely based on economic means to a multifaceted strategy –that relied on military means, on occasion- without totally dismissing the conventional “resource diplomacy”. In the same way, China’s increased presence in the Mena area –which I have alluded to in the introduction-, has urged a reconfiguration of Japan’s regional strategies. In particular, China’s presence can be considered one of the factors responsible for the enlargement of the scope of Tokyo’s regional diplomatic action which I have explored in the second section of this article. Indeed, Japan’s strengthened interest in enhancing relations with North Africa and the Gulf countries is not only driven by energy related concerns, but also by the desire to leverage greater strategic influence in areas where China is becoming more and more active.

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<sup>37</sup> This commitment is reiterated in many EU-Japan officials documents. See, for instance, “An Action Plan for EU-Japan Cooperation”, Bruxelles, 2001, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/eu/summit/action0112.html>

<sup>38</sup> See, for instance, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ed.), *Diplomatic Bluebook 2011*, p. 15, [http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/2011/pdfs/chapter2\\_p9\\_16.pdf](http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/2011/pdfs/chapter2_p9_16.pdf) (Accessed 3 February 2012).

Finally, the emergence of piracy activities off the coasts of Somalia has urged Japan to permanently expand the role of the Japanese navy in the Mena region (by means of the Djibouti base) and, at the same time, it has created an unprecedented convergence between EU and Japan objectives in the area. Japan and EU's quick and consistent response in countering piracy in the Horn of Africa shows how crucial the issue is for both actors. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to state that "Somali piracy is the most substantial non-state threat to the free and peaceful use of the sea since the Second World War"<sup>39</sup>. Because of its very nature, this threat has serious implications for both Europe and Japan. First, Somali piracy entails consequences on a political and geostrategic level. The Indian Ocean has become a "political testing ground"<sup>40</sup> as it is demonstrated by the massive adhesion of states to the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia and by states' individual initiatives as well. The states' naval presence in the Horn of Africa is not just motivated by the naval ability to combat piracy, but it is also inspired by the purpose to increase their influence and leverage in the region. The rationale for Japan and EU's intervention is no exception in this respect.

Second, Somali piracy imposes substantial human security consequences and economic costs, such as ransom payments, naval costs, re-routing expenses, insurance premiums, security equipment purchases and prosecutions. The economic costs are mostly considerable for Europe and Japan, because of the particular importance of the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait for their maritime transport interests. The Strait -located North of Somalia, between Yemen, Djibouti and Eritrea- is a strategic link between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea as well as a privileged target of piracy activities. It is calculated that 1.8 million barrels of all the traded oil (i.e. 3.2 oil barrels) passing through this strait is destined for the European market.<sup>41</sup> Approximately half of the world's container traffic also passes through the Bab-el-Mandeb. About 80 per cent of this traffic consists of Europe-Asia trade.<sup>42</sup>

Overall, the new challenges confronting the Mena region have caused Japan's interests to become more convergent with the EU's interests. Alongside with the emergence of common objectives stemming from concrete and compelling issues, such as piracy, the strengthened convergence appears to be driven by a comprehensive redefinition of the very target of Japan's diplomatic activity. Until 2001, Japan tended to consider the Middle East as the core objective of its regional diplomacy, thinking of Africa as a separate entity, mainly consistent of Sub-Saharan Africa. Conversely, in the last ten years the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has started to think of the Middle East and North Africa as one single and consistent area that has to be addressed unitedly. This is evident in the reorganization of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' section which I have mentioned in the second part of this article, as well as in the progressive inclusion of sub-regions that had hitherto been marginal in Japan's geopolitical vision, such as North Africa. The resultant Japanese picture of the region is extremely similar to the geopolitical vision of the Mediterranean space which the EU has referred to since 1989.

Japan and Europe's convergence on common interests is even more evident when compared with the United States' diplomatic moves in the region. Because of its resources of power, the United States will remain the most influential offshore balancer and the ultimate guarantor of maritime security in the Mena region. Whilst there are good reasons to believe that this role will remain unaltered, a change in the US regional position vis-à-vis the EU and Japan is already under way. As I have mentioned in the introduction, a decoupling of the US and European Mena area strategies is in progress. The issue of Somali piracy

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<sup>39</sup> See Martin N. Murphy, p. 10.

<sup>40</sup> See Lee Willet, p. 20.

<sup>41</sup> Nogami Takayuki, "Chūtō Kita Afurika jōsei to sekiyu mondai" (Middle East, North Africa and the Oil Problem), *Kokusai mondai*, no. 606 (November 2011), p. 17.

<sup>42</sup> See Martin N. Murphy, p. 6.

demonstrated once more to what extent Europe and US priorities in the region differ. It is no coincidence that the EU made the first move pursuant the 1851 UN resolution. Indeed, the European initiative was launched only a few days before the US decision to establish the coalition Task force 151 was announced. Yet, this slight advance is indicative of a different perception of regional priorities. This is also confirmed by the aforementioned actions that France and UK took in order to tackle piracy as well as by UK's recent pledge to restore stability in Somalia. On February the 1<sup>st</sup> 2012, the British foreign secretary, William Hague, visited Mogadishu. It was the first visit by a Foreign secretary for twenty years. Also, the first UK envoy for decades has been appointed. These initiatives have been accompanied by the announcement of a conference addressing the Somali situation to be held in London on 23 February 2012.<sup>43</sup>

Conversely, the Horn of Africa and, more specifically, Somalia are not at the top of US strategic concerns. The United States' reluctance to actively engage in Somalia affairs dates back to the 1993 military debacle culminated in the so called "Black Hawk Down". Since then, Somalia has been downgraded in the US diplomatic agenda, even more so, after Afghanistan and Iraq gained an overriding position in US policy. The recent visits by UK officials that were preceded by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit in August, and UN chief Ban Ki-Moon visit in December 2011 (the first visit by a UN secretary general in 18 years), sharply contrast with the US diplomatic low profile. Even though Washington is seriously concerned about the negative implications of the failure of the Somali state, it does not consider engagement on Somali soil as a viable option. Indeed, US strategic priorities have shifted to the waters off the Somali coast. Ultimately, from the US perspective, patrolling the waters of the Horn of Africa is a matter of power politics. The United States are aware that the ability to tackle piracy is a pledge that the US act as a guarantor of maritime security in the region. Undeniably, US economic interests are at stake too. Yet, as I have previously stressed, they are far less considerable than European, let alone, Japanese interests.

As for Japan's role in the Mena area vis-à-vis the United States, Tokyo's independence from the US strategies is not exactly a new element. Japanese regional diplomacy in the Middle East has traditionally been divergent from the US one. The rationale for this can be found in a sort of tacit division of labour that was based on the principles of the Yoshida Doctrine. Bilateralism implied that the United States were in charge of defending Japan from military threats through the Security Treaty (1951). On the other hand, the principle of economism embedded in the Doctrine allowed Japan to focus on economic development, capitalizing on the chances that were offered by the *Pax Americana*. This division implied that Tokyo would resort to diplomatic actions whenever threats emerged that could jeopardize Japan's economic and energy security, even if that involved challenging the US policy in the Middle East. This is precisely what Japan has done, for instance, on occasion of the 1973 oil crisis, when it shifted to a manifestly pro-Arab position, in order to tackle the oil embargo following the Yom Kippur war.<sup>44</sup>

Such a division of labour has considerably changed since the late 1980s and this has been particularly evident in the Mena area context. Japan begun to seriously weight the opportunity to replace the conventional Sea Lanes Of Communication (SLOC) security system based on US extensive deterrence as a consequence of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). Despite the request of then Japanese ambassador to the

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<sup>43</sup>“William Hague visits Somalia's Mogadishu”, BBC news Africa, February 2 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-16851216> (Accessed February 3, 2012).

<sup>44</sup> The shift was accomplished through the so called *Nikaïdo communiqué* (November 22, 1973) which called for the withdrawal of the Israeli forces from the territories occupied in 1967. Japan's adoption of a pro-Arab position became visible in the decision to host a visit by Yasser Arafat, the leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization (August 1975) and in the following resolution to open a PLO office in Tokyo (February 1977). One more consequence of the new stance was the rejection of the equidistant position between Israel and the Arab states that Japan had so far adopted within the United Nations. G. D. Hook, J. Gilson, C. W. Hughes, H. Dobson, *Japan's International Relations. Politics, Economics and Security*, pp. 96; 310-1.

United Nations that Iran and Iraq and all other states refrain from shipping disruptions and respect the right to safe navigation, attacks on neutral shipping did not cease, and this severely threatened Japanese maritime transport interests.<sup>45</sup> Ultimately, this case warned Japan that non-military means were not a panacea for all Middle East crises. A long and incremental process followed that led to the expansion of Japanese naval capabilities. In 1981, the Japanese government allowed the Maritime Self-Defence Forces to patrol the SLOC as far as 1,000 nautical miles off the Coast of Japan.<sup>46</sup> The threat environment which emerged after the Cold war confronted Japan with new challenges which stimulated a further strengthening of Japanese maritime strategy. This was chiefly accomplished through the modernization and expansion of the Japanese Coast Guard (2001)<sup>47</sup> and the significant changes envisaged in National Defence Program Guidelines (*Bōei keikaku no taikō*) which were approved in 1995, 2004 and 2010.<sup>48</sup> The overall effect of this process can be clearly discerned in the Mena area. Consistent with its resource oriented diplomacy, Japan has continued to prioritize “comprehensive security”, but, at the same time, it has reduced its reliance on the United States’ maritime security umbrella. The above mentioned opening of the Djibouti base is a manifest evidence of this. Until July 2011, the Japanese Maritime Self Defence Forces personnel had been headquartered and housed on a U.S. military base in Djibouti. The handing over from the United States to Japan heralds the end of an era: the patrolling of the sea lanes connecting the Middle East to Japan is no longer completely delegated to the United States. At the same time, it suggests that Japan has become geographically closer to the Southern border of Europe and, accordingly, is better equipped to dialogue with the European partner on Mena area related issues.

“Indifference” is a word often used to describe Japan-EU relations. In a famous article, Nuttall talked of the two actors as “reluctant partners”, arguing that “at best they can discern trends, warn what the future may hold and preach the importance of the relationship”.<sup>49</sup> Pessimistic as it may seem, this description grasps some critical elements that have undeniably characterised the relationship between the two actors. The new regional landscape in the Mena area provides an unprecedented chance to set a different bilateral trend, no more wrought by indifference. For the first time, Japan and Europe are confronted with the urgency of tackling complex issues in an area which is of vital importance to both of them. The critical nature of the “Arab spring” and the piracy issue do not allow room for hesitation. Besides, the strong and mutual interests shared by Europe and Japan are an excellent premise for the development of a steady bilateral cooperation. There are no more alibis to be reluctant. Will Japan and Europe seize this chance?

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<sup>45</sup> See, Tsuneo Akaha, “Japan’s Response to the Threats of Shipping Disruptions in Southeast Asia and the Middle East”, *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 59, no. 2 (Summer, 1986), pp. 255-277.

<sup>46</sup> R. J. Samuels, “‘New Fighting Power!’ Japan’s Growing Maritime Capabilities and East Asian Security”, *International Security*, vol. 32, no. 3 (Winter 2007/08), p. 89.

<sup>47</sup> *Idem*, pp. 94-99.

<sup>48</sup> See Alessio Patalano, “Japan’s Maritime Strategy. The Island Nation Model”, *Rusi Journal*, vol. 156, no. 2 (April/May 2011), pp. 85-7.

<sup>49</sup> Simon Nuttall, “Japan and the European Union: Reluctant Partners?”, *Survival*, vol. 38, no. 2 (Summer 1996), p. 104.