

Japan and the Four Visegrád Group States (V4) – Ways Forward

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The V4 – A Sleeping Beauty?

The V4, also known as the Visegrad Group, is a format of regional cooperation, consisting of four Central European countries. The group facilitates strategic dialogue and aligns on major policy issues, e.g., European Foreign and Security Policy. As the four countries' populations add up to around 65 million, comparable to France's population, the group gives the four states a chance to shape policy that they might be unable to do individually. The cooperation partners, Hungary, Slovakia, Czechia, and Poland, are all members of the European Union and NATO. To create synergies within the larger international organisations, the V4 states cooperate at the national

level through dialogue between their national parliaments and parliamentary committees (The Visegrad Group, n.d.).

The presidency over the V4 rotates annually, with the current presidency responsible for setting the group's broader policy priorities. The seventh presidency aimed to increase the V4 states' influence during key negotiations on the EU Multiannual Financial Framework for 2028 to 2034. Among many other key priorities, technological independence was a strategic aim to reduce dependencies, particularly by building a semiconductor ecosystem (The Visegrad Group, n.d.).

In light of the deteriorating transatlantic relationship and the importance of the Indo-Pacific as a new geopolitical arena, each V4 country has aimed to respond to these major shifts. Under the Slovak presidency, the V4 have begun revitalising relations with key partners, such as Japan. With the recent meeting between the V4 and Japan in September, the question of what partners can expect or want from one another needs to be addressed.

Japan and V4 – Reliving a New Spring?

Japan's engagement with the Visegrad Group began in 2003, when Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visited Poland and the Czech Republic and discussed stronger cooperation with the group shortly before its members joined the EU (Matusiak, 2020). Japan subsequently became the first non-European partner to hold a V4 dialogue, institutionalising ties under the V4+Japan format (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Poland, 2021). This cooperation was elevated to the leaders' level at the first V4+Japan summit in Warsaw in 2013, followed by the 2014 Exchange Year, which extended engagement beyond high-level diplomacy into cultural and goodwill initiatives (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2013).

Building on this foundation, V4+Japan gradually developed more practical areas of cooperation. By 2021, this included third-country support, disaster prevention and environmental projects. The foreign ministers also identified cybersecurity and connectivity seminars, Western Balkans assistance, joint science and technology research and think-tank coordination as recent major achievements (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2021).

Political engagement continued through the second and third V4+Japan summits in 2018 and 2019, and the seventh foreign-ministerial meeting in 2021 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2026d). Ministerial dialogue then paused for five years amid a broader V4 crisis rooted in fundamental differences over Russia's aggression against Ukraine, reducing regular political cooperation within the group to a minimum (Ogrodnik & Żornaczuk, 2024). This hiatus marked a clear loss of momentum for the V4+Japan format at the political level.

The eighth meeting, held near Bratislava on 1 September 2026, sought to reactivate cooperation through science and technology workshops, Horizon Europe-related collaboration, AI governance and renewed Western

Balkans engagement (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2026b). The meeting signals renewed political interest, but its impact remains unproven. Its significance will depend on the drivers behind this renewed engagement and on whether it translates into substantive cooperation.

Japan's Strategic Aims for Cooperation

At the meeting, the foreign ministers confirmed three fields in which both sides are keen to cooperate. The cooperation should lead to strengthened scientific and technological cooperation to build an innovation ecosystem. Through joint workshops, also under the Horizon Europe programme, which Japan joined in late July 2026, the key aim is to create safe, secure and trusted shared innovation systems (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2026). Japan values scientific cooperation and seeks to extend cooperation within this framework with V4 countries, bringing together Japanese companies, universities and research institutions to join forces for scientific progress (The Japan Times, 2026).

The second priority set out is cooperation on AI governance and safety (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2026). Japan's policy strategy "Free and Open Indo-Pacific", presented in 2016 by the Kishida Administration, received its long-awaited and necessary update in Spring 2026. The Takaichi Administration aims to address challenges posed by accelerating technological innovation, especially in Artificial Intelligence. As Japan has recognised the risks of ungoverned AI use, it aims not only to build the necessary infrastructure to use it but also to emphasise the importance of a globally recognised framework to combat its harmful use.

The third strategic priority discussed in the foreign ministers' meeting was the stability and development of the Western Balkans. This approach is shaped by the overall geopolitical shift. With the US unable to set foreign policy priorities or, if set, change them weekly, Japan is in a difficult position where it hosts US troops but lacks the final certainty if the US-Japan alliance is still strong enough to deter potential Chinese assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, Japan is diversifying its partnerships. As early as 2024, Japan signed a Security and Defence Partnership with the EU, acknowledging the interconnectedness of the European and Indo-Pacific security theatres (EEAS, 2024).

Beyond these three immediate priorities, Japan also has broader strategic reasons for engaging the V4. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for Eastern and Central Europe was formally established through a regional platform called the "16+1," which targeted the region as a strategic gateway to Europe (Brinza, n.d.). In recent years, the once-promising project has largely stalled as several countries have scaled back their participation or withdrawn entirely due to concerns about strategic dependence. Japan aims to fill this gap, not necessarily through infrastructure investments, but through extended cooperation. Furthermore, Japan is aware of the

constraints that unanimity can place on the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. In particular, Hungary, under former Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, repeatedly used its veto power (Goldmann & Alemanno, 2026). Even though Orbán has lost the general election in Hungary, other governments, especially Fico's Slovak government (Dersi, 2025), maintain close ties to China that extend beyond trade. Cooperating with other Central and Eastern European countries within the V4 framework allows Japan to build relations with the European Union and stabilise it by voicing concerns about China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific and aligning foreign policy priorities for the region. Japan's engagement within the V4 framework serves as a dual-purpose strategy: it counters China's ambitions in Central and Eastern Europe while simultaneously stabilising a blockade-prone EU foreign policy from within, leveraging the interconnectedness of Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security to neutralise potential vetoes before they can paralyse the Union.

V4's Strategic Aims for Cooperation

For the V4 states, Japan's value lies primarily in investment, technological cooperation and economic diversification.

First, Japan is an important source of investment and industrial activity in Central Europe. Japanese companies are concentrated in manufacturing and have become significant employers across Central Europe. A 2023 study of Japanese investment in the V4 identified 279 Japanese companies and 52,000 jobs in Czechia, 303 companies and 53,000 jobs in Poland, 162 companies and over 33,000 jobs in Hungary, and 52 companies and 13,000 jobs in Slovakia (Kolmaš, 2023). These figures show that Japanese business was already substantially embedded across all four V4 economies before the 2026 revival. This gives the V4 an interest in maintaining a regional dialogue that supports long-term Japanese investment, industrial cooperation and employment.

A second interest is access to Japanese research and technological capabilities. At the September 2026 V4+Japan foreign-ministerial meeting, the five governments agreed to strengthen scientific and technological cooperation through V4+Japan workshops and Horizon Europe, while also expanding cooperation on global AI governance, including AI safety and security (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2026b). For the V4, this creates opportunities to connect universities, firms and research institutes with one of the world's leading non-European innovation economies (WIPO, 2025). The value, therefore, lies not simply in accessing Japanese technology but in deepening research links and strengthening the V4's own capacity for joint innovation.

Japan also offers the V4 an additional partner for economic diversification and supply-chain resilience. Although V4 economies remain deeply integrated into the EU single market, their industrial sectors also depend

on external suppliers. In Czechia and Poland in 2024, China-dependent product categories accounted for around 13–21% of imports, particularly in machinery and electronics (Michalski, 2024). Such concentration can create both supply-chain resilience risks and strategic dependencies, including exposure to the weaponisation of economic dependencies or economic coercion (European Commission, 2024). This economic-security dimension was also reflected in the 2026 meeting, where the V4 ministers pledged to support Japanese business activities and cooperate on more stable supply chains (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2026b). Cooperation with Japan, therefore, offers the V4 greater diversification and resilience within its EU-centred economic framework.

Taken together, these interests show that Japan is valuable to the V4 as an established economic partner and as a source of technological cooperation and greater economic resilience. The 2026 revival creates an opportunity to deepen these areas, but also raises the question of whether the renewed dialogue is practical in nature or remains primarily diplomatic.

A New Minilateral Framework or Destined to Fail?

The Japan-V4 partnership functions through real-world integration. Even though the partnership is not formally institutionalised, industrial and economic ties with over 930 Japanese companies operating in the V4 states heavily stabilise local employment and manufacturing. Major structural transitions, such as Nippon Steel's acquisition of U.S. Steel Kosice in Slovakia and planned additional investments of US\$1 billion, show Japan's continued interest in establishing operational hubs for Japanese industry in Europe (Narioka, 2026).

However, the format also faces structural constraints that limit its ability to function as a bridge between Japan and the EU. Because the V4 is an informal intergovernmental format rather than an EU institution, its institutional reach is limited. It cannot speak for the Union or act on matters falling within EU competences, such as the common commercial policy (European Union, 2016). Japan already maintains direct relations with the EU and bilateral ties with each V4 state (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2025). The format can therefore add value only by complementing these channels, rather than competing with them.

Limited internal coherence is another constraint. Poland, Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary differed substantially in their responses to Russia's aggression against Ukraine and in their broader eastern and security policies during the 2022–2023 V4 crisis. Because common V4 positions are formulated through coordination among the four governments, these divisions can hinder coordinated external action (Ogrodnik & Żornaczuk, 2024; Visegrad Group, 2021). For Japan, this makes V4-level cooperation less predictable and limits the format's practical value.

Its added value is further weakened by uneven national incentives and strong bilateral alternatives. For Tokyo, the format involves a cost–benefit calculation: when does a four-country channel offer more value than bilateral or EU-level diplomacy? That value is unlikely to be equal across all four relationships: Japan’s relationship with Poland has significant strategic and security depth, while Czechia has strong Japanese industrial ties (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2026a, 2026c). Where Japan can pursue its objectives through bilateral or EU-level channels, the case for a four-country format becomes weaker.

Finally, continuity remains a structural weakness. The five-year gap in ministerial dialogue illustrates this vulnerability. Although the 2026 meeting resumed engagement (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2026b), without sustained follow-up, the format risks remaining dependent on temporary political attention rather than becoming a reliable long-term channel. V4+Japan can therefore add regional coordination and network-building to Japan’s existing EU and bilateral relationships, but it cannot replace either channel.

Conclusion

The revival of the V4+Japan format demonstrates a shared interest in deeper cooperation in the areas of technology, economic resilience and global governance. For Japan, the partnership offers an opportunity to expand its presence in Central Europe, counter China’s influence and forge closer ties with the EU. For the V4 states, the focus is on reliable investment, technological innovation and the diversification of supply chains.

Nevertheless, the future of this minilateralism remains uncertain: the lack of formal institutionalisation, internal political differences within the V4 group – particularly in foreign and security policy – and Japan’s strong bilateral channels limit the format’s scope. The alliance has potential as a complementary network, but will not be able to replace Japan’s direct relations with the EU and individual nation-states.

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