



CSDS-Asia Matters Podcast — 12/7/2022

An overlooked actor? Japan's role in South East Asia

Edited transcript

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Andrew Peable: Hello and welcome to CSDS-Asia Matters, the podcast whose aim is to bring you the background and fresh perspectives on the major stories and themes playing out in the world's most fascinating region. I'm Andrew Peable.

In this episode, we're going to take a look at Japan's role in Asia, and in particular, its relations with Southeast Asia. While there's plenty of coverage of China's increasing economic and diplomatic clout in the region, Japan — still of course, the world's third largest economy — has for decades been a major investor in the region. Not only that, it has also built strong diplomatic ties with Southeast Asian nations, and has recently been cooperating more closely on defence issues, most recently signing a deal with Thailand for example.

At a time when interstate relations in Asia are evolving and becoming more complex, we wanted to look into the often overlooked role of Japan, and also to understand how countries in Southeast Asia view Japan's position.

To do so we're joined by Eva Pejsova. She's a senior fellow at CSDS with a research portfolio that focuses on security issues in the Indo Pacific region. Hello again to you, Eva.

Eva Pejsova: Hi, Andrew, good to be back.

Peable: And we're delighted to be joined for the first time by Maria Thaemar Tana. She's an assistant professor in international relations at the University of the Philippines. Welcome to you, Maria.

Maria Thaemar Tana: Hello, Andrew. I'm happy to be here.

Peable: And it's great to have both of you for this discussion. Eva, we've talked before on this podcast about Japan's evolving foreign policy, particularly under the long leadership of Shinzo Abe, and now under Fumio Kishida. Can you start us off by setting out what level of importance Japan attaches to its relations with Southeast Asian countries? And how Southeast Asia, for example, fits into Japan's strategy of promoting a free and open Indo Pacific.

Pejsova: Thanks a lot. Andrew, I should start by saying that I'm really glad that we're having this conversation in the first place. Because as you said, these are the sorts of developments that somehow tend to go under the radar. So I'm really glad we get to look at it. But to your question: Southeast Asia is and frankly, has always been one of the highest priorities for Japan, not only as a source of resources, investments and trade, but we should not forget that geographically, it is also a region that sits physically on Japan's vital sea lanes of communications, which connects it to its Middle Eastern oil terminals, resources in Africa and trade with European countries. So for an island nation that Japan is, for a trading nation, building a friendly environment in Southeast Asia and ensuring a stable and resilient Southeast Asian region has always been part of a highly strategic interest and in fact, one of the building blocks of Japan's regional foreign and security policy.

Now it's a relationship that has evolved significantly over the past decades from essentially a more economic one in the 80s and 90s through industrial cooperation, investments, etc, to a much more political one, or strategic one, since, let's say, beginning in the 2000s, but much more over the last decade since 2010. And now we see that in the multiplying security and defence ties at the bilateral but also regional level, but it's also in Japan's support for regional integration, it's a very active supporter of ASEAN centrality and involvement in those various ASEAN-centred regional groupings, such as the East Asia Summit, the ADMM plus, the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting; plus as a dialogue partner, which is basically a part of this newfound role of Japan's in shaping the regional strategy, dynamic and affairs. And these are all reflected in FOIP, in the free and open Indo Pacific concept. You find the promotion of inclusiveness, multilateralism, but also connectivity, economic integration, be it through quality infrastructure lately, or trade deals. So it's nothing new, it's a continuity, but we see a shift towards indeed a more political and strategic role that Southeast Asia plays in Japan's calculus.

People: Do you see that shift as being driven by a sort of defensive motive, in the sense that Japan is worried about China's growing influence or because it's worried that, say the United States, which has been Japan's ally for so long, is becoming more isolationist. So do you see it as a defensive thing? Or is it more a proactive shift in Japan's emphasis, in terms of it being about Japan building its own influence and security?

Pejsova: Well, the short answer would be all of the above. So of course, all these three are essentially interconnected. Of course, the rise of China...and that's what marks this shift, as I said since 2000 and 2010, towards a more strategic approach, is driven very much by the increasing influence of China in the region, which inevitably leads to a shrinking share of trade and political influence for Japan, because there was almost a monopoly before that. So the China element is definitely there.

But at the same time, and as we discussed before, Japan has become a much more self aware political actor, much more determined to play a proactive role in global and regional security. And Southeast Asia is a very natural target for this, because both when we look at the map, we realise that Japan's immediate neighbourhood is not very friendly to Japan, China, Korea,

Russia. So it [SE Asia] is a region that is much friendlier or more like minded, naturally a destination to turn to.

Now, the US element is somehow there, but I wouldn't say it's the main one. The U.S. security alliance remains undisputedly the key pillar of Japan security policy. And that will be the case for the years to come. The US-Japan ties have rarely been stronger, with Japan also stepping up its own contribution to the partnership. But of course, let's face it, the possibility of the US turning inwards at some point is something that all US allies, including Japan, need to account for. And somehow it is part of the Japanese strategic calculus, and all of Japan's allies again. So boosting its own security, also through the diversification and deepening ties with other partners, is obviously part of such thinking.

Peaple: Maria, how have these efforts by Japan gone down within the region, would you say? Kishida, who's been Prime Minister of Japan for still less than a year, has already visited several countries in the region, from Cambodia, to Thailand, Vietnam, and so on. Why do you think it's been so important for him to make these visits and how have his sort of diplomatic efforts been received?

Maria Thaemar Tana: Well, the aim of these visits really is to foster exchanges of opinion over Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and with China's increasingly hegemonic behaviour in mind, to promote cooperation with Southeast Asian leaders, to realise the free and open Indo Pacific, uphold the rules based order, and to share the recognition that any unilateral attempt to change the status quo by force should not be allowed. Kishida sought to reinforce and expand the emerging strategic ties with regional states, while at the same time gathering support against research in China and against Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Now, why are these visits important? Well, Japan is seeking to diversify its strategic partners, establishing a network of US allies and partners in the Pacific is a means to strengthen the current alliance system and to prevent the US withdrawal. The diversification of its security partners also provides Japan a safeguard against possible US strategic retreat. In the longer term, I guess, these partnerships will also provide an option for Japan to become more autonomous from the United States.

Japan, likewise, has also long wanted to be acknowledged as a key stakeholder in the Pacific. And to achieve that it needs to actively contribute to the build up of the emerging regional order, by positioning itself as the central player, able to provide public goods and help manage both soft and hard security matters in the area.

The second question, how have his efforts been received? Well, his efforts have generally been well received, and his Southeast Asia tour highlights the fact that Japan continues to be regarded as an important partner by many Southeast Asian states. Most of the states share with Japan a concern over China's rise and increasing military assertiveness, but they are wary of the US's securitized approach to regional security. Japan is viewed differently, and more favourably. And indeed herein lies its advantage, because it can offer more than the region

needs and wants, including, for example, mutually beneficial economic engagement, fair and transparent infrastructure financing, and a security counterweight to China's growing influence, without endangering the norm of non interference, particularly on issues on democracy and human rights. So compared to the US and other Western countries, and I guess, despite supporting controversial US efforts like the Iraq War, Japan is perceived to be more credible when speaking about the rules-based order. Japan is regarded to be more neutral, or at least less self righteous than Western states that frequently violate international law, depending on their self interests. Japan, in this sense, can engage Southeast Asian states more constructively and would be more likely to influence their foreign policies, particularly toward contentious issues like the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and China's military expansion.

Peaple: So it's really interesting that Japan is seen as a country that's relatively welcome in the region. Can we talk a little bit about some of these defence pacts, though, that Japan has been making with, most recently Thailand as I said, in the introduction, and Singapore, and so on. As we know, Japan has been a pacifist nation since World War Two, it's built into the country's constitution. So what's going on here? What's in these pacts? And what is Japan's goal here?

Pejsova: Well, I think we need to remind ourselves also what happened within Japan, because all these pacts have been largely enabled by a lot of the reforms that have taken place under primarily Abe's administration; and one of them was the lift of its self-imposed ban on arms exports and defence technology transports in 2014, which gave an additional boost to already ongoing security and defence discussions with a lot of those Southeast Asian countries.

So you mentioned Thailand, which is one of the latest examples, but there are deals with Vietnam, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, which are called the defence equipment and technology transfer agreements with Japan, that are part of this of these broader bilateral efforts to strengthen security and defence cooperation. Now, they are accompanied by various capacity building exercises, staff exchanges, training, so it is not just about the capability boost, but it's really a much more comprehensive agreement.

In fact, the latest addition was Singapore, just a few days ago at the Shangri-La dialogue, we heard that there was a new security and defence deal between Japan and Singapore, all very much welcome. At the ASEAN level, this is very much in line with the so-called Vientiane vision that was promoted by Japan 2016. Now we have a second generation of it in 2019. But overall, it is what Maria said, an effort or an agreement on sharing the values of international law and rules-based order, etc. A lot of emphasis on maritime security, for the reason that I mentioned earlier, but overall, it is an effort to encourage a greater ASEAN strategic autonomy and resilience, which is inherently beneficial to Japan's own interests.

Peaple: Maria, again, I wanted to ask you whether that's seen as something that's positive across Southeast Asian nations. In a sense, you can see that they would probably like to have Japan's support and do these defence agreements. But at the same time, this is a region where China, the US, even some European countries are becoming more active in the military sphere. Do countries sort of welcome this growing defence presence of Japan?

Tana: Well, just to add to what Eva said, Japan's objective is to strengthen regional alliances and establish regional order that is not defined by China's economic, geographic and strategic dominance. And as part of these efforts or these objectives, Tokyo has forged a strategic partnership with the region partly to share the burden of addressing security challenges and to support the capacity building of other countries in the region.

So let me give as an example the case of the Philippines. In 2015, Japan and the Philippines signed a defence agreement called 'Strengthen the strategic partnership for advancing the shared principles and goals of peace, security, and growth in the region and beyond'. So it's quite a long title. This effectively upgraded the strategic partnership and broadened the scope of security cooperation. And the declaration emphasised the Philippines and Japan's contribution to the peace and stability of the Asia Pacific region. And it showed that amid growing regional threats, Japan is now more actively engaged in joint military exercises, defence cooperation and exchanges through dialogues with regional allies like the Philippines.

Now how is this being received? I guess positively because it did help the Philippines upgrade some of its defence technologies by providing patrol boats, radars, other defence transfers and technologies. So again, that's been received favourably by Southeast Asian countries like the Philippines.

People: So we've touched on maritime security both of you have. Japan obviously has its own maritime territory disputes with China over the what it calls the Senkaku islands, what China calls the Diaoyu islands. But of course, plenty of other countries in the region have their own disputes over various islands in the South China Sea and other areas. So what I wanted to ask in relation to that, then, is with this growing presence of Japan in the defence sphere with other Southeast Asian countries, is it also getting involved in some of these territorial disputes? Is it trying to sort of form common cause with some of the other countries that are facing pressure from China over who has claimed to what, in the seas around these countries?

Tana: So Japan began actually to seriously consider territorial issues and its own regional positions in 2010 following an incident in the disputed waters near the Senkaku Islands in which a Chinese fishing boat collided with two Japanese coast guard vessels; and this incident resulted in a serious diplomatic row between Japan and China, and tensions quickly escalated after Japan nationalised three uninhabited private islands in the Senkaku. In the South China Sea disputes intensified in the mid 2000s, Japan too started taking action related to the issue. Japan is not the claimant state, but it is nonetheless a commercial enabled stakeholder, as its vital sea lines of communications pass through the South China Sea, through the Straits of Malacca. Japan is also concerned that existing norms would be undermined if China successfully urges other Asian states into accepting its claimed historical rights in the South China Sea. And Japan perceived the link between China's disputes over the EECs in the South China Sea with Southeast Asian claimant states, and its own dispute with China over the Senkaku islands in the East China Sea.

So in view of China's expansion and incursions in the South China Sea, Japan then began to engage more actively in Southeast Asian security affairs.

Peuple: Eva, what's your perspective on this? Is Japan trying to form common cause with other countries in the region over these territorial disputes?

Pejsova: Well, yes, absolutely. It's all interconnected, obviously, the East China Sea, South China Sea issues, and Maria has already mentioned the importance of the South China Sea for Japan. But it follows up very well on what we discussed on defence pacts. Actually, although they are called more defence or applied to military equipment, they were preceded by civilian cooperation on law enforcement in the context of piracy, in the context of Chinese assertive actions in the South China Sea. So Japan was always supporting Southeast Asian countries, Philippines, Vietnam, to be able to defend themselves, to be able to assert their own or take care of their own maritime zones. So inevitably, the connection is there.

Now politically, of course, there is a hope that such sustained cooperation from relations would in turn be translated into more sympathy of Southeast Asian nations to the Japanese cause, which do not directly impact them in the East China Sea, but are very much related.

Peuple: Is there a limit, though, to what Japan can do here, given its own internal politics, given this legacy of it being a pacifist nation since World War Two, and I wondered also whether I could ask you, where you see this headed conversely. I mean, Japan has already become a founding member of the Quad, this tie up between India, Japan, Australia and the US, which some see as having defence partly in mind. Do you see structures like that expanding in Japan, encouraging that sort of expansion to defence pacts across the region? I just wonder where you see this headed, and at the same time, how it marries up with Japan's own internal politics?

Pejsova: Well, specifically on the Quad I keep asking myself when I get this question: what would really be the aim of the Quad expanding further? Because essentially, it is supposed to be an informal consultation group, it is not institutionalised, it is not an institution that is aimed at taking more members, especially in Southeast Asia where we are aware of the sensitivities and of the careful balancing between trying not to lose completely, or alienate China. Any sort of expansion like that, or Japan pushing for a more assertive stance, would be counterproductive. The Quad specifically is perceived among some Southeast Asian nations as being targeted against China, so here we go; but also as undermining, in a way, ASEAN centrality. So I don't think that there's an interest, I don't think that would be either from Japan, that would not be very wise, or from the Southeast Asian countries. And here the biggest goal or trick for Japan, is really to maintain its communication and engagement in Southeast Asia beyond the threshold of too much alienating China, because it needs to be aware, and it is very much aware that those links are there to stay, and that none of the countries want to go too much beyond the red line here.

Peaple: Maria, could we talk a little bit about what role Japan has played in contentious issues in the region that are actually going on now, particularly, for example, what's happening in Myanmar? I think you've also written in the past about Japan and its operations in the Philippines, in peacekeeping and so on. Can you talk us through about how much of a presence, how much of a role Japan plays in getting involved in internal problems in countries across Southeast Asia and again, how that role that it plays is perceived.

Tana: Let me begin by saying that human security remains an important element of Japanese foreign policy, and that Japan has been actively contributing to peacebuilding efforts not just in the region, but in other parts of the world as well, like Sudan. Japan, then, is being urged to play a more active role in Myanmar, especially given Japan's close relationship with ASEAN and also because Tokyo has ties and contacts with the Tatmadaw and the National League of Democracy and other domestic political forces and citizen groups in the country. Japan, however, is also being criticised for its invisible diplomacy and apparent passivity, despite being a champion of human security. But we have to remember that Japan is also constrained by the ASEAN principle of non interference, and it is also worried that it will drive Myanmar closer to China if it takes punitive actions against the junta.

Now, in contrast to Myanmar, Japan's engagement in Mindanao is considered one of its most successful cases of peacebuilding for human security. Japan's peacebuilding engagement in Mindanao began in 2002. But it's important to note that Japan has been providing official development assistance to Mindanao since 1989. It was limited to non-public areas and it was never intended to facilitate poverty reduction. A significant development in Japan's peace building in Mindanao occurred when Japan decided to participate in the international monitoring team. So it was interesting because it was the first time that [...] dispatched a staff in a politically unstable environment. This was also the first time that Japan participated in the process led by Muslim states, and beyond the UN and the US-Japan alliance framework. And it also signalled Japan's willingness to engage early in the Mindanao peace process, before the cessation of hostilities and the signing of the peace agreement and to cooperate not just with the Philippine government, but with the rebel group as well.

What makes Japan's peace building in Mindanao unique is the so-called tripartite mechanism. So there's this close relationship or link between the IMF, the Japanese Embassy, which is the head of the Mindanao Task Force, and the Jaybird programme that cannot be replicated anywhere else. So that is what makes it unique, and that's probably contributed to its success. But over the years, Japan has also expanded its peacebuilding, probably beyond the conventional development assistance models. For example, in 2011, the Japanese government hosted a meeting between former President Aquino and MILF Chairman Ibrahim. It was the first time since the peace talks began 14 years ago that the Philippine president met face to face with the leader of the MILF. And this is actually thanks, in part, to the efforts of Japan.

Peaple: It's absolutely fascinating. It's a real insight into a situation that maybe we don't hear much about. And a real example of where Japan's influence in the region is felt on the ground. Maria, I wanted to ask you also about Japan's economic importance to the region. I think it's

underestimated how much Japan still invests in the Southeast Asian region. And I wanted to talk to you about how its investment is seen, particularly when compared with that by China, which obviously is generating a lot more attention and headlines these days. How important is Japan as an economic partner for countries like the Philippines and beyond?

Tana: So you're right. A few years ago, there were a lot of thoughts that the Philippines would be the beneficiary of massive Chinese aid that would lead to huge infrastructure projects. This has not come to fruition. And the fact is, Japan remains the largest source of high end infrastructure investments not just in the Philippines, but in Southeast Asia. When I had this conversation with a Japanese diplomat, he stressed that what makes Japan's investment or ODA, to the Philippines or to other countries in the region, is that Japan places more emphasis on the quality rather than the quantity. So even if it seems like China has more investments in the region, actually Japan, according to officials, the quality of their investments, and ODA are still better and could generate more jobs.

I have already mentioned the difference between Japan and the US and how Southeast Asia views Japan more favourably. And in one survey conducted by ISIS, you saw a sharp rise in elite regional perceptions. Japan has continuously been seen as Southeast Asia's most trusted partner. And this could be mainly due to Japan's long term and deeply engaged partnerships with ASEAN states. Also, strong economic ties and mutual recognition of interdependence have fostered closer relations between Japan and Southeast Asia.

And it's also worth mentioning that even regarding the Quad, and the FOIP, which as Eva has mentioned, some in Southeast Asia worry about that would undermine ASEAN centrality, Southeast Asian Leaders still favoured Japan's most inclusive vision of the region.

Peaple: That's really fascinating. And Eva, is this seen within Japan as an important pillar of its diplomatic activity in Southeast Asia?

Pejsova: Absolutely. And it's also historically so. I mean, Japanese official development aid has been the main diplomatic instrument or the main way to engage with its partners for a very long time. And in fact, the ODA tradition in Southeast Asia roots all the way back to war reparations, so we are really getting all the way to the 1950s. I found some numbers to support what Maria said: apparently, in 2019, the value of Japanese investment projects were revalued to \$367 billion, as opposed to \$255 billion by China. So we are a good third above. In that sense, as Maria said, with Japan, we don't really talk about it that much. And we tend to focus more on China, because it's all over the headlines, because we are seeing also Japan as a stagnating economy as opposed to China's growing one. But what I find interesting is also where it's channelled, especially through the 70s, 80s and 90s. Japan has been really a key actor in maritime safety, for instance. But let's not forget that the Japanese shipping industry basically financed the traffic separation schemes in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore, which are extremely useful. All this infrastructure that is related to natural disasters, earthquake monitoring systems, tsunami warning systems, port infrastructure, and of course, then there was the known ones such as bullet trains, etc.

Now, where it's also very important today is that Southeast Asia is the destination of Japan's efforts to diversify its supply chains, call it the China plus one scheme. So not to be, you know, overly reliant on solely China. So Indonesia, Thailand are home to some of the automotive production, chemicals and pharmaceuticals in Malaysia or the semiconductors manufacturing in the Philippines, which clearly is something that will be even more important in the future. So, Japan has been already looking at Southeast Asia for that.

And nowadays, we see also an increasing focus on so-called soft infrastructure. So the digital transition, but also governance; with experience Japan realised that there's gaps in some of the public, private or private governance sectors, but also health education research and a lot of green technology green transition. As you know, Japan is one of the promoters of COP 21 and the green transition globally. So that's the sort of fields, on top of the quality infrastructure, that Japan is taking the lead on also together with other partners; and I'm looking at it from the European perspective, but also with America, I suppose.

Peaple: We've talked a lot about Japan's tangible links with the region, defence, economic infrastructure and diplomatic as well. I wanted to talk about some of the more intangible things about Japan's relations with Southeast Asia though, and in particular, that legacy of World War Two. As we know, during that period, Japan was very much the aggressor in the region, occupying various countries in Southeast Asia for varying lengths of time. When we look at today, and obviously we're several decades now on from World War Two and so much has changed in the world, but does that historical legacy still cast a shadow at all over Japan's relations with the region?

Tana: So the historical memory of the war had in the past imposed constraints on Japan's endeavours to create close relationships in Southeast Asia, and sometimes provoked suspicion among the nations in the region regarding Japan's intentions. So this is no longer the case, I think. Before, Southeast Asian states and the people had rejected any involvement by Japan and political affairs, and Japan was reluctant to take the initiative or commit to political or military issues. In the more recent years, however, I guess especially after 9/11, Japan has assumed a more proactive role in regional and international security. Examples of Japan's increased pro-activeness are the militarization of ODA: the 2015 Development Cooperation charter linked ODA with military cooperation; the adoption of the national security strategy in 2013, which aimed at strengthening Japan's deterrent capabilities, reinforcing the military alliance with the United States and developing security partnerships with Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Australia, India and South Korea.

So as one scholar pointed out, Japan is now moving in the direction of becoming a full-fledged middle power. And the concept of proactive pacifism drives Japan's efforts toward deeper engagement in international security. Overall, Japan is now seen as a legitimate and benign strategic actor in the region. And while historical memories remain, Japan is no longer heavily constrained by them. What constrains Japan, I think, is more its domestic norms, and still largely the predominant norm of anti-militarism, and that most of the Japanese people are still largely

pacifist. So that's why Abe was so keen on revising the Constitution when he was Prime Minister.

Pejsova: It seems frankly, that short of the revision or explicit revision of Article Nine, there have been so many legislative moves and reforms that have really largely enabled and made it flexible, including on the right of collective self defence, including on arms, exports, etc. So the debate is moving on. And when we look at the surveys these days, we see support for a greater defence budget in Japan, etc, etc. So we are really in the middle of an evolving debate.

But setting that aside, of course, I concur with what Maria said on the historical part. But I think it's important to remember that the Southeast Asian experience historical experience with Japan's militarism is fundamentally different from the one in Northeast Asia. In the sense that it's much more, I wouldn't say positive, but it's far less bad. And this is not to diminish the atrocities, of course, and Japan's dark side, but in a way, when you say that Japan was the aggressor, without getting too much into details, I guess, there was a sense that it was a liberation moment as well, because Southeast Asia was under the colonial rule before that. So it was perhaps seen somehow as the lesser evil. But yes, there was an opposition in the 50s and 60s, especially from the communist countries, criticising Japanese Imperialism, and warning against that. That has very much changed throughout the 70s and 80s, with the Fukuda doctrine, with Japan taking leadership in a lot of the financial recovery efforts, for instance, with the Chiang Mai initiative at the end of the 1990s with the financial crisis, and this sustained interest and sustained investments, targeted investments; and sometimes it was also donations when talking about the patrol boots to the Philippines, mixed with now what 70 years of pacifism, has really resulted in a much more favourable image and all those issues that Maria has raised. So yes, Japan is now perceived as a more neutral, more trusted partner in the region, especially in the context of the US-China rivalry.

Now, the close attachment to the US is still perceived a little bit with cautiousness. But I find Japan has been quite smart in trying to navigate that in its communication with Southeast Asian countries.

Peuple: It's interesting. So to sum up, I think both of you have painted a pretty positive picture of Japan's relations with Southeast Asia and how they mutually see each other. But I wanted to ask how you see that evolving in the future and what the challenges are. Despite these strong relations, for example, and despite this relatively positive atmosphere, do you see Japan inevitably losing out as China's influence over the region expands ever further? Or do you see this path that it's on actually remaining relatively successful into the future?

Tana: I'm not quite sure about winning or losing. But I think Japan's relations or position in Southeast Asia will still be characterised more by continuity than change. Japan, at least under the Kishida administration, or in the succeeding ones in the next few years, will maintain the basic trajectory of Japan's foreign policy, while introducing some critical new issues or focus, such as adding emphasis on economic security. In the security domain, the Kishida administration in Japan will likely continue to offer enhanced capacity building assistance,

particularly for naval and Coast Guard operations pertinent to the South China Sea. So the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia are, of course among the most receptive.

But still, given the varied Asian views and the expanding security role and Article Nine constraints, Japan will continue to proceed incrementally in this area. And diplomatically, there is, I think, total reason to expect Kishida to take a much bolder track. So Abe's initial vision for the Indo Pacific received a quite cool response from Southeast Asian governments which were wary of democracy promotion, and are unwilling to antagonise China, and propose to see the ASEAN central position in the regional order. So Japan would be likely, I guess, to maintain the more flexible approach that it has adopted since 2008.

So the Southeast Asian governments, I think, will look to Japan to continue providing a quiet but robust presence in the region economically, diplomatically, and, to a lesser extent, in the security domain.

So in terms of winning and losing, and to which direction Southeast Asia will shift. Well, I guess, if China quote unquote 'wins' this rivalry, then Southeast Asia will gravitate towards that. But if it's the US, then it's up to them. I guess it depends on how the balance of power unfolds and how great powers in the region the relations will play out.

People: Eva, do you see Japan as having found a sustainable strategy in Southeast Asia that can maintain its influence, even if, as I said, China continues to grow?

Pejsova: Well, indeed, I would agree with Maria on the fact that we are likely to see more of the same, but gradually more and more, this is a trajectory that started and that is very likely to continue under the current and possibly future governments. But in a sense of, you know, winning or losing, again, I'm an incurable optimist here in the sense that I think that there is space for cooperation, not necessarily perhaps in the security and defence domain with China; but in terms of connectivity, investments, and infrastructure, because the needs in the region are so important that there's plenty of space to accommodate all the actors. So the sort of ideal scenario for me would be to create a healthy competition, simply, when it comes to investments into regional infrastructure. With the FOIP, Japan does not exclude China's participation. China does not exclude the participation of other actors either. And we see a project, bullet trains in Vietnam, for instance, where the two exist side by side. And I think that that's really the sort of situation or scenario that we should look at.

The potential pitfalls on the Japanese side, and I mentioned that already, would be its own economic stagnation. But I think that that's a gap that could be potentially filled through cooperation with other actors. We've seen this partnership for sustainable connectivity or quality infrastructure, with Europeans under the Global Gateway, with the build back better world, a US-led initiative, etc. So there will be more focus on Southeast Asia in the future, that's for sure, not just by Japan, but also by other actors. And if we can translate this interest, and in a way that started also by an effort to kind of provide an alternative to the Chinese investments, and arrive at a sort of healthy competitive environment that ultimately boosts the situation on the

ground, that would be the best case. Now, of course, for Japan, especially as I said, the biggest challenge is to stay aware of the regional sensitivities and dependencies and not to push too much against China or towards this bipolar division, which it is very much aware of and is trying to do.

People: Well, thank you both. I think we've really shone a light on this relationship between Japan and Southeast Asia, which, as I said at the start, doesn't always capture the headlines, but kind of really should. It's such an important relationship and really fascinating to hear from you both about how it's working and what exactly is going on at the moment. So thank you, Eva. Thank you, Maria, for joining us.