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## Japan-Southeast Asia Relations at New Heights

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Over the past decades, Japan has been working on strengthening its ties with Southeast Asia with regard to political, economic, and security cooperation. On April 29, 2022, the Japanese Prime Minister, Fumio Kishida, embarked upon his three-nation tour of Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand.<sup>1</sup> This visit comes at a time when there is an ongoing Russia-Ukraine war and the Chinese are increasing their maritime assertiveness. Japan's foreign policy agenda has been quite evident over the last decade regarding the Southeast Asian region. This makes PM Kishida the third consecutive Japanese Prime Minister who chose this region to be their first official foreign visit. Former PM Shinzo Abe and Yoshihide Suga had done the same, showing the continued importance of this region in the policy of Japan.

Japan has emerged as a great force in Southeast Asia in terms of being a top trading and investment partner for ASEAN. It has also been a key defence and strategic partner for Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines.

#### *Japan - Indonesia*

PM Kishida met with Indonesian President Joko Widodo. He discussed bilateral relations along with the broader strategic issues in the Indo-Pacific. Both nations affirmed their commitment to a rules-based international and regional order to counter China's assertiveness and to go along with Japan's free and open Indo-Pacific as well as ASEAN's centrality in the region. Indonesia also held 2+2 talks with Japan to boost their defence relations. During a joint press conference, PM Kishida said, "We are facing many challenges, including the situations in Ukraine, the East and South China Seas, and North Korea, and maintaining and strengthening the rules-based, free, and open international order has become more important."<sup>2</sup>

Indonesia is this year's host country for the G20 Summit which is likely to be held in November. Japan views Indonesia as a key economy in Southeast Asia and a strategic partner with universal values of the rule of law and democracy. The G20 Summit could also prove to be a negotiations table for both Russia and Ukraine as the Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky both are invited. PM Kishida's visit was particularly pointed out to countries that refused to take a tough stance on Russia's actions in Ukraine. Singapore is the only Southeast Asian nation that has imposed sanctions on Russia.

#### *Japan - Vietnam*

In Vietnam, PM Kishida met with Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh and the Vietnamese Communist Party Chief, Nguyen Phu Trong. Among other things, they decided to provide humanitarian assistance to the Ukrainians. Both countries also opposed threats and the use of

weapons of mass destruction. Vietnam has not openly condemned Russia's actions in Ukraine as the country has been relying on Russia for around 80 per cent of its defence imports, including submarines and fighter jets. The Vietnamese leader, however, pledged US \$500,000 in humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, which PM Kishida saw as a positive step toward supporting the affected people in Ukraine.<sup>3</sup>

Leaders of Vietnam and Japan affirmed to take their strategic cooperation to a new level by further boosting their economic and security ties. PM Kishida also addressed public concerns regarding human rights in Vietnam, particularly regarding freedom of expression. PM Kishida urged the Vietnamese government to release those imprisoned for exercising their rights.

### *Japan - Thailand*

PM Kishida also met with Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-Ocha. The two nations agreed to provide humanitarian aid to Ukraine as well as work on upholding rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific. The two leaders condemned Russia's aggression and how it has affected the sovereignty and territorial integrity of a region. Furthermore, Thailand has not openly criticised China's aggressive behaviour in the South China Sea and the East China Sea. Nevertheless, Japan's strategic priority is to get Thailand to understand China's actions and work towards countering its behaviour. Thailand is the host country for this year's Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit. PM Kishida announced a package of US \$385 million in assistance to Thailand for the Covid-19 pandemic recovery.<sup>4</sup>

Japan and Thailand signed a defence agreement, which is vitally a defence equipment and technology transfer agreement. Thailand has enhanced its relations with Japan to a more comprehensive strategic partnership through its defence dealings. This agreement would allow the transfer of defence hardware and technology from Japan to Thailand and would also help in national defence and promote investment from Japan. Thailand is Japan's biggest investor, and the leaders also discussed improving supply chains<sup>5</sup>.

PM Kishida also reiterated that Thailand should pursue democratic rule and respect for human rights for close economic and business relations between Tokyo and Thailand. The Thai leader should end the oppression of free expression and peaceful assembly. This year marks the 135th anniversary of diplomatic ties between Japan and Thailand, which makes PM Kishida's visit more significant.

## Conclusion

Southeast Asia is a vital region for Japan as it hosts some big names in the industry in the fields of infrastructure, engineering, and manufacturing of electronics and vehicles. Remarkably, the rise of China's aggressive behaviour has not hampered Japan's economic importance in the region. In recent times, Tokyo's investment in the region has increased to the US \$367 billion as Japan wishes to be a major export destination for the Southeast Asian nations.

PM Kishida aims to strengthen security ties with Southeast Asia by working towards a free and open Indo-Pacific. Tokyo has also become a power in the region through its economic influence and strategic ties. Both nations are also working towards ASEAN Centrality in the Indo-Pacific, in which India too has a prominent role to play. Japan is also hosting a Quad summit by the end of May in which the fundamental agenda would be the Ukraine crisis and China's role in the global order. The importance that the Southeast Asian region has for Japan is likely to flourish in future regarding the economic development and the ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> "Japan PM to visit Southeast Asia, Europe from April 29 amid Ukraine war", *Kyodo News*, April 28, 2022, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2022/04/b840d6bae752-breaking-news-kishida-to-visit-3-southeast-asia-2-europe-states-from-fri-to-may-6.html>. Accessed on April 30, 2022

<sup>2</sup> "Rules-based order crucial amid Ukraine crisis, Kishida tells Indonesian leader", *Japan Times*, April 30, 2022, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/04/30/national/politics-diplomacy/kishida-southeast-asia-europe/>. Accessed on May 01, 2022

<sup>3</sup> "Japan, Vietnam affirm respect for sovereignty amid Ukraine war", *Kyodo News*, May 01, 2022, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2022/05/7a6e9ee752a3-japans-kishida-vietnam-chinh-meet-over-cooperation-amid-ukraine-war.html>. Accessed on May 03, 2022

<sup>4</sup> Panu Wongcha-um, "Japan PM Agrees Defence Deal With Thailand", *US News*, May 02, 2022, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2022-05-02/japan-pm-to-discuss-defence-customs-deals-on-thailand-trip>. Accessed on May 04, 2022

<sup>5</sup> "Japan and Thailand agree new defense deal", *CNN*, May 03, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/05/03/asia/japan-thailand-defense-pact-intl-hnk-ml/index.html>, Accessed on May 04, 2022