

Sigur Center
for Asian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY



Japan's Middle Power Diplomacy in an Era of Great Power Competition

Japan increasingly finds itself caught between great power rivalries, first and foremost between the U.S. and China, and secondly, between the U.S. and Russia. The outcomes of these rivalries will have lasting ramifications for stability and diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific. What are Japan's options in navigating this unfolding strategic landscape? Although its relationship with the United States is key for regional security and stability, one approach for Japan is to adopt a strategy of middle power diplomacy and strengthen its ties with other countries in Asia. To examine these issues and offer recommendations for Japan's vision and future actions, the Sigur Center recently hosted Ambassador Kazuhiko Togo, former Ambassador of Japan to the Netherlands, and Professor Emeritus Yoshihide Soeya of Keio University. The conversation was moderated by Mike Mochizuki, Japan-US Relations Chair in Memory of Gaston Sigur at the George Washington University. The recording of the event is [available here](#).

Shifting the Trajectory of Japan's Legacy

As both Ambassador Togo and Professor Soeya discussed in their remarks, Japan's current policies are constrained by its actions from the World War II era. While they have not necessarily hindered Japan's economic and national growth, the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty of 1960 and Article IX of Japan's post-war constitution, in which "the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes," have curbed Japan's ability to move past its rising power status. Due to these limitations, Soeya argued that both Japanese society and politics have long been divided, leading

to complications and occasional inconsistencies in the framing of Japanese foreign policy and thought.

Ambassador Togo emphasized that Japan is finally overcoming the constantly shifting legacy of its alliance with the U.S., which was characterized by extreme pacifism on Japan's side and a minimalist view of self-defense forces. Consequently, Japan chose to rely on the United States for its remaining security concerns. Japan has begun revising this past approach by strengthening shared security responsibilities with the United States, paradoxically leading to greater Japanese autonomy in its defense and military affairs. He noted that greater security responsibility allowed Japan to exert a more autonomous foreign policy, including a more diplomatic approach towards China, embracing the possibility of consistent dialogue upon the realization of Japan's own deterrent power.

The Balancing Act of Middle Power Diplomacy

Soeya asserted that in order to move past the divisions within its society, Japan's diplomatic practices should follow an ideological middle line and move towards reconciliation. Despite its economic prowess, Japan should take this balanced middle power approach while also carefully navigating the tense rivalries throughout the region. Both Togo and Soeya praised Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's efforts to compromise amidst growing regional power asymmetries and his dedication towards the realization of a free and open Indo-Pacific region. However, Soeya noted that Abe's actions also triggered complications as Japan embraced a greater role in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). This is because despite strong consensus within the Quad on issues like energy, disaster relief, cybersecurity, and combatting COVID-19, the question of how to approach China's rise is still being debated. Potential for an Indo-Pacific accord is growing, but Soeya argued that the main agenda being discussed in public is one of great power rivalry instead of regional cooperation. Middle power diplomacy is key here as Japan can capitalize upon core country dialogues but also expand them to intraregional countries and the Indo-Pacific as a whole.

With these concerns in mind, Japan is uniquely positioned to drive the creation of an Indo-Pacific infrastructure predicated on multilateral decision making. Soeya critiqued Korean conventional wisdom that it is surrounded by four great powers: the United States, China, Russia, and Japan. Instead, as Japan further embraces its role as a non-nuclear, quasi-independent country, it can help reframe Korea's perception and instead incorporate South Korea as yet another middle power alongside Japan.

In order to create wide areas of cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and greater economic ties encompassing the entire region, Togo contended that Japan must realize its flexibility at the diplomatic table. Noting tension between the Quad and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—largely in part due to US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)—Togo acknowledged the argument Japan had been at odds with itself by being the de facto leader of the TPP while it delayed negotiations for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Japan is embracing both the free and open Indo-Pacific goal and China's One Belt One Road Initiative through these actions, a dual-path approach rooted in Abe's administration, which best serves Japan's interests and desire for the region. Soeya added that Japan must invest in economic opportunities where the US-Japan shared regional goal overlaps with China's aspirations.

Deepening Regional Ties

Given Japan's strategic location, the best path forward is for Japan to maintain positive, collaborative relations with all actors in ASEAN and RCEP. South Korea plays a key deterrence role in the region and would be an extremely beneficial partner, but Korean-Japanese relations have been fraught for the last century. Togo pointed out that mutual understanding between the two countries post-annexation and post-World War II was at a high point following South Korea's rise as a democratic, economic and cultural power, but the relationship quickly deteriorated after the South Korean 2018 court ruling on conscripted workers and rulings against the Japanese state on comfort women. Furthermore, Japanese nationalists and liberal Koreans have both been quick to critique centrist compromises. The next few months will be crucial for increasing cooperation given President Joe Biden's push towards a partnered South Korea and Japan. Togo argued that diplomacy will be essential and that it is time for Japan to show greater flexibility in its dialogues—both countries have quickly forgotten the shared 2,000 years of cooperation before the 20th century. Leveraging a shared desire between the two countries for regional security with the United States is the logical step forward. Togo stressed that both countries should be able to create acceptable middle ground where there are mutually beneficial considerations.

According to Togo, Japan should also continue on its trajectory with Russia. Abe recognized the strategic importance of maintaining open dialogue and heavily emphasized expanding economic relations, security dialogue, supply chain considerations, and more. Togo underlined that bilateral dialogues can expand towards transparent, broader regional collaboration and that Abe was resolute in the need to finalize a Japan-Russia peace treaty, even

prepared to propose maximum concessions in order to achieve the treaty. Togo recognizes that the recent focus on Navalny's detention might test Prime Minister Suga's ability to engage Russia, but he suggests capitalizing on Abe's momentum as the most effective direction.

Outlook for Japan

Both Togo and Soeya offered additional recommendations on issues facing Japan. For Taiwan, Togo recommended that given the sensitivity of the issue, Japan should avoid any provocative statements or actions and seek a peaceful cross-strait solution. Closely tied to the idea of sovereignty was Togo's opinion on the Senkaku Islands, for which Japan's policy thus far has only been to manage the islands with a light hand. In the South China Sea the Japanese government should listen carefully to assess what ASEAN desires from Japan.

Overall, it may be concluded from the panel that Japan is eager to continue its role as a leader in the Indo-Pacific. By maintaining shared security responsibilities with the United States while seeking the most effective message to send to China and Russia, Japan appears to be embracing its middle power diplomacy and signaling a strong, peaceful future for the Indo-Pacific region.

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About the Sigur Center for Asian Studies and Rising Powers Initiative

The Sigur Center for Asian Studies is an international research center of The Elliott School of International Affairs at The George Washington University. Its mission is to increase the quality and broaden the scope of scholarly research and publications on Asian affairs, promote U.S.-Asian scholarly interaction and serve as the nexus for educating a new generation of students, scholars, analysts and policymakers. The Sigur Center houses the Rising Powers Initiative, a multi-year, multi-project research effort that studies the role of domestic identities and foreign policy debates of aspiring powers. The Sigur Center's Rising Powers Initiative examines how domestic political debates and identity issues affect international relations in Asia. RPI acknowledges support from the MacArthur Foundation and Carnegie Corporation of New York for its activities.

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