



Interview

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# “Ukraine Was a Wake-Up Call” – Japan, Alliances, and the Future of Security in the Indo-Pacific

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**Dr. Ken Jimbo**

Professor of International Relations at Keio University and a Managing Director of Programs at the International House of Japan (IHJ/I-House). Adjunct Senior Research Fellow at the Canon Institute for Global Studies (CIGS). Served as a Special Advisor to the Japan Ministry of Defense (2020) and Senior Advisor to the National Security Secretariat (2018-2020).

**The visit to Poland by Prof. Ken Jimbo, one of Japan's leading security experts, provided an excellent opportunity to discuss the changing security architecture in East Asia. In the face of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, growing pressure from China, and uncertainty surrounding the future role of the United States, we asked how Japan is redefining its alliance strategy. Professor Jimbo, a professor of international relations at Keio University and an advisor to government institutions, presented the Japanese perspective on challenges that increasingly link the security of Europe and the Indo-Pacific.**

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## **Adrianna Śniadowska (AŚ):**

Professor, Russia’s aggression against Ukraine has shaken Europe’s security architecture. From Japan’s perspective, was this also a turning point?

## **Prof. Ken Jimbo (KJ):**

Yes, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 had an enormous strategic impact on Japan. It was an event that triggered a national awareness in Japan of the need to prepare for the possibility that strategic crises may spill over beyond their original regions. The war in Europe clearly demonstrated that armed conflict can have global consequences and that there is no longer such a thing as a “safe distance.”

Prime Minister Kishida put it very clearly when he said that “tomorrow East Asia could be what Ukraine is today,” pointing to the direct link between the situation in Eastern Europe and a potential crisis around Taiwan.

This war has provided us with concrete lessons at every stage of the conflict: from its outbreak, through the conduct of military operations, to negotiations. The most important lesson concerns deterrence. In Ukraine, deterrence failed. One of the key reasons was mutual miscalculation—both the aggressor underestimated the response of the other side, and the defenders underestimated the aggressor’s willingness to use force. It is precisely such moments that create a “window of opportunity” for aggression.

For Japan, this means the need to close such windows—especially with regard to Taiwan. Hence the need to strengthen alliances, enhance real response capabilities, and clearly

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signal at the strategic level that the United States and Japan are prepared to respond to escalation. Ukraine truly was a “wake-up call,” the final impulse to adopt a new security strategy and increase Japan’s defense budget.

**AŚ:**

As you mentioned, Japan is responding to the regional situation by expanding its defense capabilities. Could you explain to a Polish audience what Japan is preparing for and what the main flashpoints in the region are? Recently, for example, tensions along the Beijing–Tokyo line have been widely discussed in Poland.

**KJ:**

China is still pursuing an unfinished project of national reunification, with Taiwan remaining its key element. The integration of Taiwan under the “One China” principle is viewed in Beijing as a core national interest, and it is accompanied by unresolved territorial disputes: in the South China Sea, around the Senkaku Islands, and in relations with the Philippines.

It is worth emphasizing, however, that China does not always treat border disputes in a strictly zero-sum manner. In the past, it has been capable of negotiating compromises, for example with Russia or Central Asian states. On the so-called “eastern front”—toward Japan, the Philippines, and Taiwan—such flexibility is virtually nonexistent. There, a logic of no concessions and an absence of readiness for compromise prevail.

The second key factor is the rapid shift in the balance of power. China is expanding its military capabilities at a pace that is radically altering the regional balance. Its defense

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budget is now roughly five times larger than Japan’s. This gives Beijing a sense of advantage and greater freedom in managing escalation, and in an extreme scenario, the belief that a military operation could succeed.

The strategy of Japan, Taiwan, and other regional actors is no longer about “catching up” with China in terms of scale, as that would be unrealistic. The goal is what is known as a “denial strategy”: maintaining capabilities that prevent China from achieving operational success. The idea is to create a situation in which the Chinese leadership concludes every day: “not today.” If this mechanism works for the next 10–15 years, it may be possible to maintain the status quo.

**AŚ:**

What about traditional alliances? In Poland, we are closely watching the growing uncertainty surrounding U.S. domestic politics and questions about the durability of American global commitments. If the United States no longer wants to act as a “global policeman,” how should Japan respond to this uncertainty?

**KJ:**

This is a fundamental question that Japan must face today. For decades, the U.S.–Japan alliance has been the cornerstone of Japan’s and the region’s security. The entire architecture of our security—from the structure of the Self-Defense Forces, through arms procurement, to legal reforms—was built on the assumption that the United States would come to Japan’s aid if necessary.

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Today, that assumption is increasingly being questioned. Slogans such as “America First,” fatigue from long-term interventions, and narratives about the “unfair burden-sharing” in alliances are changing the way the United States perceives its commitments. It is increasingly emphasized that allies cannot “free-ride” on American security guarantees.

Therefore, Japan—much like European countries—is increasing defense spending and its own capabilities in an effort to maintain the credibility of the alliance. At the same time, for the first time in its postwar history, Japan must consider a scenario in which American engagement is no longer a given. This is an unprecedented and extremely difficult strategic situation.

**AŚ:**

During each of your visits to Poland, you speak about the concept of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), popularized by Prime Minister Abe. In Poland, it is relatively little known. This vision places strong emphasis on linking security and economic development. What are its key strengths, but also its limitations?

**KJ:**

Indeed, it has already been ten years since the concept of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific was first presented. It has been adopted by, among others, the United States and the European Union. It has become a global point of reference, and the Indo-Pacific region has been widely recognized as the center of global economic growth and power.

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The aim of this concept is to create an open, rules-based environment in which both investors and states in the region can benefit from development in a predictable manner. Japan and like-minded countries invest not only in physical infrastructure, but also in legal frameworks, institutions, and human capital.

At the same time, the Indo-Pacific faces real challenges: the rise of China’s power, territorial disputes, and technological rivalry. FOIP does not ignore these problems, but it is not a confrontational project. Japan emphasizes that this is not a “Japanese” Indo-Pacific—within the shared idea, each country can define its own priorities. The Japanese understanding of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific is inclusive: it is not about imposing confrontation, but about creating conditions for stable growth and cooperation from which everyone can benefit.



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The Centre for International Relations (CIR - CSM) is an independent, non-governmental think tank specialising in Polish foreign policy and key issues of international affairs.

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Centre for International Relations | ul. Ogrody 24, 03-994 Warszawa | +48 608 593 632



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