



Ear to Asia podcast

Title: Anxiety and aspiration in Japan-China relations

Description: For Japan, China is both its largest trading partner and its greatest strategic threat. And while Tokyo has garnered admiration for how it walks the line between its ally Washington and Beijing, it's now set to draw up a new defence strategy with China likely top of mind. So what has the Xi Jinping era meant for bilateral ties? And how much of the shared history between China and Japan remains a factor today? Richard McGregor, veteran journalist on East Asia and Lowy Institute senior fellow, joins presenter Ali Moore to ask what China and Japan really want from one another. An Asia Institute podcast. Produced and edited by profactual.com. Music by audionautix.com.

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Voiceover:

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Ali Moore:

Hello, I'm Ali Moore. This is Ear to Asia.

Richard McGregor:

In some ways, Japan is the great strategic failure of China. We tend to think of the Chinese as great strategists and the like. But if China really wanted to break America in Asia, they would have pulled Japan closer but they just are unable to do that. I think because of Chinese internal politics nobody gets very far by being "soft on Japan". And as a result of Chinese behavior, Japan has just got closer to the United States.

Ali Moore:

In this episode, anxiety and aspiration in Japan-China relations. Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialist at the University of Melbourne.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the normalisation of post-war relations between Japan and China. But for Japan, for whom China is at once its largest trading partner and its greatest strategic threat, how much is there to celebrate? Japan has increased its scrutiny of China's policies in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, and there are ongoing and growing tensions over disputed islands in the East China Sea. At the same time, Japan's long standing security alliance with the United States remains a thorn in China's side. Yet as China's largest source of foreign direct investment and with a business sector enthralled to the vast China market, Japan has somehow found a way to walk a line between the world's two superpower rivals.

So with the recent change of leadership in Tokyo and plans being drawn up for a new defence strategy, we ask, what's the state of play in relations between Tokyo and Beijing? What's the Xi Jinping era meant for bilateral ties? How much of the two countries' shared history remains a factor today, and what lessons are there for other countries like Australia in how Japan manages its relations with China? Joining me on this episode is Richard McGregor, veteran journalist on the East Asia beat and now senior policy fellow for East Asia at Lowy Institute. Richard has written widely on politics in East Asia, including *Asia's Reckoning: The Struggle for Global Dominance*. His most recent book is *Xi Jinping: The Backlash*, published in 2019. And his articles can regularly be found in publications such as Foreign Policy, Nikkei Asia and the Australian Financial Review. Welcome to Ear to Asia, Richard.

Richard McGregor:

Hi there.

Ali Moore:

If we can start in current times and maybe given Australia's difficulties with China, if I compose a question with a particularly Australian lens, to what extent can Japan's relationship with China be held up as a good example of a productive relationship, despite differences? If we look at the views of former Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd, for example, he's lauded what he's described as Japan's modus operandi of putting their megaphone under the desk and being selective about when to speak up. Is he right? Is the relationship a good example?

Richard McGregor:

I think there's something in that you don't want to take it too far, but as you alluded to in your introduction, Japan and China, enormously complex and important relationship. And also because of the history issue, that is the history of the war, very emotional as well. But somehow through all these ups and downs, including an ongoing territorial dispute between the or two countries in the East China Sea, they manage to continue to have a dialogue. Now, it is up to a point, as Kevin Rudd said, because the Japanese put their megaphone under the bed, or under the desk as it were. It's also because Japan has all these ways of conducting talks with China through back channels. You have a lot of very senior Japanese politicians who have got relationships with China outside of the government, outside of the ministry for foreign affairs. In Japan they call them pipes between the two countries. And so they can talk to the Chinese and pass messages across.

It's also I think because they are coming off a low base. The Sino-Japanese relationships fell into a heap in 2010, 2012 when the territorial dispute flared up. So they've been building up since then. And I think it's also because unlike in Australia, one of the striking things about the collapse in the relationship between Australia and China is the business community in Australia has been quite muted. In Japan they're a big voice. It's the most important economic relationship that Japan has. I think about a quarter of its imports come from China, about a quarter of its exports go to China. So I think the business ballast is greater than Australia.

And just one other point as well. In the last decade or so, US relations with China have been going downhill fast. And a lot of Chinese scholars used to say to me, well, whenever our relations with the US are bad, our relations with Japan improve.

Because the Chinese don't want to be too isolated. They put more effort into the relationship with Japan. So I think for all those reasons, Japan's policy of sort of do more say less and the like, the complexity, the emotional element in there, which adds paradoxically, an element of restraint, and the long history of back channel signalling, I think have all kept the relationship relatively stable. I might say, as you said, they walk a narrow road. That road as China rises is getting narrower by the day.

Ali Moore:

It's probably worth noting that Japan's ambassador to Australia said just last year that he didn't subscribe to the views of people like Kevin Rudd about Japan. In his words, he said every day, Japan is struggling with China. And I want to return to the question of history and also the question of the role of the US. But you talked about business and those extraordinary connections through business. Is one of the reasons the relationship does work as it does at the moment because both sides simply have so much invested in getting the balance right?

Richard McGregor:

Yes. Japan's economic relationship with China is very different from Australia's. I like to say Australia does business with China, but not in China. In other words, Australian businesses aren't big investors in China. We kind of produce stuff, we mine stuff, we grow stuff and the like, and we ship it off to China and we get until COVID, a lot of service income in the terms of tourists and students. Japan's very different. Japan sells capital equipment to China. It sells parts, computer parts, semiconductor chips and the like, high tech parts, which then sort of go into the manufacturing process in China. It's thoroughly intertwined, just as the South Korean and Taiwanese economies are with China as well. It's all part of one big complex logistical sort of supply chain, which frankly, is at the heart of the global economy. So it's not very easy to unpick their economies and separate it. They kind of joined at the hip. That's the first thing.

The second thing of course is the Japanese market is shrinking. The Japanese have always gone offshore looking for other markets. Look at the car companies, the electronics companies in the seventies, eighties and nineties, with the United States and Europe. The world's biggest market for just about any multinational in the world is China these days. So if you look at big Japanese companies, a good example is Toyota, the future is China. China's the world's biggest auto market these days. And there was a striking example of that a little while back when the then Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe had this sort of a special government fund of a big amount of cash to offer to Japanese multinationals to sort of bring them back home, to invest at home. And after he announced that, Toyota pretty quickly said, well, no, thanks. We're going to keep investing in China because that's where the market is. So Japanese companies don't see any alternative, frankly.

Ali Moore:

And that's a really strong argument for why this relationship is so important from an economic perspective. What about more broadly? Why does it matter? Why does Japan-China relations matter so much?

Richard McGregor:

Well, some years ago I wrote a book about Sino-Japanese relations, and I used to tell people as a way of sort of promoting its value, I was living in Washington at the time. And if you go into any bookshop in Washington, you'll find a veritable library of books about the US and the Middle East,

the US and China, the US and Europe and the like. If you walked into a bookshop in London, there's the same thing with the UK and the US, the special relationship, UK and Europe, UK and Germany and the like. But when you come to Japan and China, the second and third biggest economies in the world, just about the biggest trading relationship in the world, an enormously complex history, as I mentioned before, a relationship which basically undergirds the entire global economy, plus I would say extremely interesting, that really tells you the importance of the topic. Not in a necessarily sort of eat your sort of broccoli type way, but that's why it's very much worthwhile studying and getting a good understanding of.

Ali Moore:

So to get that understanding, how far back do we need to go in Japan-China relations? You did mention their more recent and significant tensions in 2011 and 2012, we go back further to the late 1800s, the mid 1900s and the seemingly endless history wars. How far back would you take us?

Richard McGregor:

Well, I'm not going to take it all the way back as far as I should, but to give you an example of how to answer that question, the late and great Harvard scholar, who many of your listeners will know, Ezra Vogel, wrote a history of Japan and China which was published a couple of years ago. And he started in the eighth century because that's when we have the sort of first contact between the cultures. And frankly, that's when Japan started importing Chinese culture. Japan gets its writing system originally from China, it gets its Confucian culture and the like from China. It's obviously been modified and Japan-ified, if you like, but Japan acknowledges and is very aware of its cultural debt to China. To the point where if you're a Japanese primary school student these days, you still learn Tang dynasty poetry at school as a 10, 11 year old. So it's very sediment of everything in Japan really comes from China.

For more modern history, it's really, I guess, it's the 19th and 20th century and that's the history and the history wars. Japan first set a great example of modernization for China. Then Japan became an imperial or imperialist power and invaded China. Committed all manner of atrocities in doing so. So that's there and that never goes away. Whenever there's a big problem between Japan and China, the Chinese foreign ministry spokespeople immediately revert to, they did it last week actually in talking about Ukraine, they immediately revert to sort of Japan should learn the lessons of history. There's a lot of emphasis on that. There's less emphasis I think in how Japan once again showed the way in the postwar period as the first big Asian economic miracle.

So when China opened up in 1979, 1980 and the like and decided to join the market economy, the country they really most looked to was not America, it was Japan. And you can get a good example of that. It's up on YouTube when Deng Xiaoping, the former Chinese leader, before he visited on a famous trip to the US, I think in 1980, he went to Japan in 1979 and had a ride on a bullet train and he's like a giddy little boy when he's doing so. But of course these days, China has surpassed Japan in terms of railways. But I think Japan has been both a good example, a leader for China, and in the past, but also a brutal overlord. And that's why you get the complexities because the psychology of both those sort of relationships is very much mixed together.

Ali Moore:

And indeed the tensions in more recent times. Tell us what happened about a decade ago?

Richard McGregor:

Both Japan and China claim islands which are called the Senkaku Islands in Japan, the Diaoyutai in Chinese. They're really not much of islands. They're sort of rocky outcrops quite close to Taiwan. This is a territorial dispute which when the two set up diplomatic ties in 1972, they kind of agreed to leave to history as they say, but it flares up occasionally. And in 2010, it flared up because after the arrest of a Chinese fishing boat captain who'd been caught near there. And the Japanese put him on trial, which the Chinese said was an impingement of sovereignty. And then in 2012, when a famous ultranationalist Japanese politician, Shintaro Ishihara, who died earlier this year in 2022, attempted to buy the islands as a way of asserting Japanese sovereignty. And the Japanese government came in over the top of him and nationalised them. And of course this caused an uproar in China. And I think the two sides came as probably close to some form of military conflict at that time. And that really put relations into a deep freeze in 2012.

And the side of the equilibrium we see these days, the kind that Kevin Rudd talks about, really has grown out of that. They've only gradually increased the tempo of ties. It took about six, seven years before Xi Jinping agreed to meet Abe and the like. But it just goes to show, this territorial dispute is ever present. The Chinese patrol their boats around the island and the Japanese chase them out. Over time as China becomes more powerful, they want to force the Japanese to negotiate over them. And it's a symbol, I think, of the tough road ahead for both nations, even though the islands themselves don't amount to much.

Ali Moore:

To what extent today is Japan working towards building a counter narrative against China, particularly as China becomes increasingly assertive, and not necessarily just around the disputed islands, but more broadly in the region?

Richard McGregor:

I think there's two ways of looking at that. One is Japanese domestic opinion and how that feeds into local domestic Japanese politics. And then there's Japan and the region. Let me go with the first one first. China's image in Japan has not been good for some time, really starting with the 1989 crackdown on protestors in Beijing and elsewhere in China by the military. That's when the deterioration started. And that poor view of China has really hardened, I think, in the past decade or so as China itself has become more assertive.

And I think the Japanese have been tired of being lectured about history whenever it suits the Chinese. They think the Chinese use the history weapon against them cynically. I might say, of course, Japan has its own dark corners on history and I want to acknowledge that, that it's become a political weapon. And Japan, for all its problems, is a democracy. And they look at China and they see a country which I think they increasingly fear and don't trust. And one of the striking changes you see, Japan has never made much of a fuss of human rights issues, but in the past five years or so, Japanese politicians, parliamentarians, are much more focused on that. And I think that's an indicator of the sea change in Japanese attitudes towards China.

The second point, if you look at a counter narrative, I think it's worth looking at Japan in the region. We often have the view in Australia, I think, that sort of China dominates Southeast Asia through the so-called Belt and Road and is about to do the same in other parts of the world. In fact, Japan's

business footprint in Southeast Asia is bigger than China's. Not only that, Japan's sort of foreign aid footprint is bigger than that of China. So Japan really out competes or competes with China in Southeast Asia. So if you think of the history wars and the like, that's a big problem for Japan and South Korea and China. But if you look at Southeast Asia where Japan was also an occupying power, and frankly in Australia as well, I think wartime history is really receding behind us now. So Japan has become more critical of China at home and it competes harder against China abroad. So I think that's the counter narrative, if you like.

Ali Moore:

And if we stay in a security space though, we've got the Quad, the Security Dialogue with Australia, India, the US and Japan. We've got the Reciprocal Access Agreement, a defence treaty of sorts between Japan and Australia. What does China make of things like that? And what does it mean, closer security ties within the region, what does it mean for China?

Richard McGregor:

Well, in short, they don't like it. They were willing to put up with the US military presence in Japan some decades back, because back then, this is a long time ago, the US military presence in Japan was considered to be there to control the Japanese. But we're in a completely different era now. I always like reminding people that the US has more troops in Japan than it has in any other country in the world. So it's really America's most important military ally, especially at a time when Asia and security in Asia is becoming more important.

You mentioned the Quad. Now the Quad really comes out of initially a disaster response to the tsunami in Southeast Asia about 20 years ago. But the Quad in the form as we understand it now, that is a Japanese initiative of Shinzo Abe in his first term as prime minister. Abe has always had good relations with India. He's always made clear to stick closely to the US. And of course he had good relations with conservative leaders in Australia, John Howard, for example, and later Tony Abbot.

So the Quad underpinning, to use the jargon, the "free and open Indo-Pacific", that's all Japan. And so Japan in a way which people didn't think was as possible, because Japan has a sort of peace constitution, its military is limited in what it can do, has actually been a leader in new regional security responses to China. And of course, China doesn't like it. Whenever Japan has a military initiative, as I mentioned earlier, they start waving the history card again. But compared to any military build up in Japan and defence spending is still very restricted in Japan, China's military build up simply dwarfs it. So Japan is on pretty solid foundations in pursuing the policies that it has.

Ali Moore:

And indeed, it's probably timely to point out that we're recording this podcast in the first week of March and former prime minister Shinzo Abe has just called for Tokyo to consider hosting US nuclear weapons in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. That's been rejected by the current prime minister Fumio Kishida, but what does China make of Abe's intervention?

Richard McGregor:

Well, it's a total red light for China. It's a fascinating thing actually. Once Abe stepped down from the prime ministership last year, I think in 2021 we've got Abe unplugged. We had him first on Taiwan,

very explicit about Taiwan being absolutely crucial for Japanese security. He never would've said that in office. And of course, the nuclear issue even more so because of all the nuclear taboos, which sunk deep into Japanese politics and frankly, the population as well, as a result of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For Abe to raise the Taiwan on issue very boldly and then the nuclear issue as well, it really sets the Chinese off. But I don't think if Abe had said that five, 10 years ago, he might have been banished. These days it's not out of the realms of possibility.

Ali Moore:

You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. And just a reminder to listeners about Asia Institute's online publication on Asia and its societies politics and cultures. It's called the Melbourne Asia Review. It's free to read and it's open access at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. You'll find articles by some of our regular Ear to Asia guests and by many others. Plus you can catch recent episodes of Ear to Asia at the Melbourne Asia Review website, which again, you can find at melbourneasiareview.edu.au.

I'm Ali Moore and I'm joined by Lowy Institute Senior Fellow for East Asia, Richard McGregor. We're looking at the current state of relations between Japan and China.

Richard, you mentioned Abe unplugged. What about Abe and the views of him as former prime minister compared to the approach under the current prime minister? Have things changed very much when it comes to China or has it been a consistent trajectory?

Richard McGregor:

Well, it's changed a little bit on the surface. Japan kind of has a single ruling party. It's been in office really, except for a few junctures, since the mid 1950s. It's the Liberal Democratic Party. People always used to joke it was neither liberal nor democratic nor really a party. But I think that was really to say that it's many parties within one, often expressed through very tight sort of factional politics, which anybody who follows the Victorian or New South Wales Labor parties would understand instinctively.

And so the current government under Prime Minister Kishida is at the less hawkish end of the China issue. And of course, his foreign minister as well has long been a head of the China Friendship Association in the parliament, which makes many people suspicious of him. I think a little bit unfairly. Within that of course, it's basic domestic politics. Is that Kishida and Abe are rivals within the party and their factions are rivals. And Kishida doesn't want to be dictated to by Abe.

So he's quite happy when Abe makes these statements to slap him down and push back on them. But I wouldn't overstate that because I think the general trend in Japan, even with the sorts of factions which used to be much more interested in building closer ties with China, what we might call the sort of pan-Asian stream in Japanese politics, I think they've had a dose of reality over the past five to 10 years and realised that they've got to be tougher on China, they've got to be more security focused. So Abe's way out in front, but he's not as far out in front as he might have been previously.

Ali Moore:

Would you argue that there is a shift of stance towards going harder?

Richard McGregor:

Absolutely there is, but there are constraints, as we mentioned earlier. That Japan's peace constitution written for the Americans after the Pacific war, in fact, imposed on Japan by the Americans when Japan was considered to be a militarist state. That's really been taken to heart by Japanese politics and frankly, the Japanese people. And so defence spending is really capped at 1% of GDP. By comparison in Australia, it's about 2.3, 2.4% these days. So it's hard to lift that and change that in Japan. Also, the way in which Japan uses its military is limited in some respects. They have to have only defensive wars and they've done work arounds with that, but it still puts limits on the military in Japan.

And of course Japan's population is shrinking as well, which means that even if you wanted to build up your military and have more people in it, that's difficult as well. So there are limits to what Japan can do. They're gradually easing, but certainly there's been no sea change in those constraints. So while the rhetoric is much tougher and the stance is much tougher, Japan simply can't do what it wants, as say America and Australia could.

Ali Moore:

Which would seem a good time to bring in America. And I know that you argue that you can't really understand China and Japan without bringing in America. And indeed some argue that China tones down its attitude towards Japan because it sees it as a side player to the real issue, the US. How does the US fit into this relationship and how does Tokyo navigate that path between the rivalry of the two big players?

Richard McGregor:

Well, I think once they would've tried to keep their distance from a US-China dispute. I think also they've always long been paranoid that the US would bypass them and go straight to China and they'd be left fending for themselves.

In many ways in Japan, there's some deep down resentment about the US. There's resentment they lost the war. There's resentment the US forced them to have a peace constitution. There's resentment that they still rely on US troops on their soil. So there's all of that. But I think these days, the way Tokyo is handling it is frankly steering closer and closer to the US because they realise that they can't handle China on their own. China is simply too big, too powerful, too close to them. And so that the only way that they can manage the relationship with China is as an ally of the US, hence the continuation of the US military presence there, hence greater security cooperation, hence Japan being willing to cooperate more with the US and Western nations on issues like Ukraine, which they once would not have done so very quickly. And hence Japan acting as a more active player in regional security, which frankly, the US is really supportive of with countries like Vietnam, Australia, and India.

So the Japanese don't like to be considered sort of America's poodle in the region, but I think deep down they understand they need America and they have to work with them and they're willing to make compromises to ensure that the US stays there.

Ali Moore:

And has China helped to push them to that realisation?

Richard McGregor:

Absolutely. I think in some ways Japan is the great strategic failure of China. We tend to think of the Chinese as great strategists and the like, and us Westerners, all we care about what the stock price is when we wake up in the morning sort of thing – focused on the short term in other words. That if China really wanted to break America in Asia, they would've pulled Japan closer to them. They would've seduced Japan. They would've stopped talking about history every time the Japanese [dis]agreed with them. They would've stopped beating up on Japan, but they just are unable to do that. I think because of Chinese internal politics, nobody gets very far by being "soft on Japan." And as a result of Chinese behaviour, Japan has just got closer to the United States. So I really feel from the Chinese perspective, that they've really made a big mistake there.

Ali Moore:

I want to look at how China's government might or is responding, but we talked about how Japanese people feel about China. How do Chinese people feel about Japan?

Richard McGregor:

Well, it's very interesting because if you look at the public opinion surveys in both countries, in the 1980s when they first got together, had diplomatic ties again, there was really a blossoming of public positivity in both countries about each other. From the 1990s onwards it started to diverge, that Chinese got very angry, an issue amplified by Chinese propaganda of course, when some Japanese leaders continued to visit a controversial war shrine in Tokyo. In other words, weren't sufficiently apologetic about history and the Japanese responded badly to such a battering. And so the public opinion diverged quite radically in both countries.

In recent years, perhaps because of tourism, millions of Chinese before COVID would go to Japan as tourists. And of course they'd come to Japan and discover it was a thoroughly modern, open country and they started to change their views. So Chinese views of Japan have got much better, but Japanese views of China have not, to the point where in an interview about a year or two ago, Xi Jinping with some Japanese media or Japanese politicians, asked them to work to improve the image of China in Japan as if they could do anything about it, given the way China behaved. So public opinion's got better in China about Japan. It's really bad in Japan about China.

Ali Moore:

What has the rise of Xi Jinping meant for the relationship? Has it made it more difficult do you think?

Richard McGregor:

I think the rise of Xi Jinping has had the same kind of impact on Japan as it has on China's relations with the US, with Australia, with the UK, with much of Europe and the like. Xi Jinping, leaving aside him as an individual, is leading a more assertive country, a more powerful country, a country with a much stronger military, un-avowedly authoritarian. Some shocking human rights abuses in places like Xinjiang. Crackdowns in Hong Kong. Rhetoric about Taiwan. So that feeds into Japanese policy,

just as it's fed into policy in Washington, Canberra and Europe. Leaving aside whether it's Xi as a person or simply the country or the ruling communist party, it's changed. And you see that in Japan, as you see in other countries.

Ali Moore:

So when you look at all those issues that feed into Japanese policy, when push comes to shove in Japan when it comes to China, how far do you think Japan is prepared to go? We started this podcast talking about the extraordinarily important economic and business linkages that are globally important. Does Japan always have to stay on one side of a line?

Richard McGregor:

Well, that's the big question and it depends what kind of conflict we end up in. The likes of Mr. Abe and the like think that Japan must support the defence of Taiwan if the Chinese attempted to change the status quo by force. Not everybody in China would be on board with that, but I think more people would be than some years ago. Taiwan is the key issue. Taiwan's a former Japanese colony. Unlike South Korea, Taiwanese actually like Japan. Japan and Taiwan have a kind of almost emotional bond and the like.

So when push comes to shove, none of us know what's going to happen or how it would unfold, but compared to a decade ago, Japan is much more likely to get involved in the fight if that's what it comes to. Certainly it's working much more closely these days on Taiwan with the United States. And let's not forget, the US will have a lot of pressure on Japan to be on side in any conflict as well.

Ali Moore:

And indeed, Japan, as we said in the opening, is unveiling, or about to unveil, a new national security strategy. I think that's coming actually at the end of 2022. Is that likely to be detailed do you think in terms of the challenges posed by China, or do you think it's likely to be rather more obtuse in its direction?

Richard McGregor:

These Japanese security statements are becoming less obtuse, that's the Japan you and I grew up with Ali, and much more direct about China. China doesn't like it, but I think both the Japanese military and most Japanese politicians and certainly the public and frankly Japanese media, which is important, expect such statements to be much more explicit and honest about China. Not just about the Chinese military, but about the nature of the ruling communist party in China. So I would expect more clarity there.

Ali Moore:

I've asked you about how far you thought Japan would go if push came to shove, but what about if it didn't get to some sort of military confrontation, but just this trend that we're seeing towards being more outspoken and given that huge range of issues, particularly under Xi Jinping and whether it's rights in Xinjiang, or whether it's Hong Kong or economic coercion. Whether it's of the other number of issues that are important, both in the region and indeed globally, how vocal do you think Japan is prepared to be? You noted a change in recent years, but how much further can that go?

Richard McGregor:

Everything's really changed these days. The US has changed. The US is more vocal. That sets the tone. For many years, Japan has been frankly, working or speaking behind the scenes about China, in Europe in particular, on the issues of technology, technology theft, IP, all that sort of stuff. What they would regard as an unbalanced uneven playing field in terms of the way that China runs its economy and the like. Taiwan, it very much depends on how it unfolds, whether there's any kind of negotiated settlement there. That's pretty unpredictable, but we'll see how patient China is. But I think that Japan is going to be very uncomfortable with Taiwan being ruled from Beijing. And it won't support that if it can help it. And I think is increasingly willing to support a maintenance of the status quo, not just behind the scenes, but probably more outspokenly as well.

Ali Moore:

So with all we've spoken about Richard, what do you think the lessons are for countries like Australia from Japan's approach to managing relations with China?

Richard McGregor:

I think they are becoming less than they were even a year ago. I'm certainly critical of the way Australia's managed relations with China, not so much the policy, but the execution of it. In other words, we almost had a kind of bring it on attitude to China. And I think that we didn't need to protect our interests to do that. But having said that, as the Japanese ambassador said, as you mentioned earlier, I think Japan and Australia's policies are probably converging. As we were record this, we're about to enter an election campaign in Australia and that obviously is ramping up the rhetoric on China. But as of the last year or so, it'd been sort of trending down a little bit.

But even if the rhetoric goes up and down now in Japan and Australia, I think the basic facts of life are that China is getting more powerful. It has certain aims which are going to bring it into conflict, not just with Japan and Australia, but most importantly with the United States and also many countries in Southeast Asia. And that's going to be incredibly difficult to manage. We talk in Australia about how Australia has taken sides or chosen sides. I think that's the case in Japan as well. So the sorts of differences between our approach I think are narrowing, rather than widening

Ali Moore:

At the same time though, do you think that if the issue is not the policy but the execution, do you think that there is something to be said for Australia to maybe look at putting the megaphone under the desk, going back to the comments that we mentioned earlier from Kevin Rudd?

Richard McGregor:

It's a matter of discipline, really. We had all manner of players in the execution of China policy. We had a very bipartisan frankly group of backbenchers who were making as much noise as possible. We had a government where the ministers would sort of be disciplined one minute and then be making all sorts of statements the next, often I think as part of internal jostling for a profile within the party and the like so this is the biggest foreign policy challenge I think Australia has faced since the Pacific war. And we have to sort of be disciplined in how we manage it. And I think the Japanese system is much better at that. And we also have to find ways of signalling with China. So if we want

to get our message across, we have to be more sophisticated about it rather than having a sort of one tempo or sort of one sort of megaphone always turned up to 11. We'll see what happens after the election.

Ali Moore:

Indeed. To finish this conversation, if we go back just to China and Japan, what do you think in the end ultimately they want from each other?

Richard McGregor:

China simply wants to be the most powerful country in the region. And it wants to, relatively speaking, dictate terms. I don't know whether it's really like an old tributary system or whether they want Japan to be a subordinate, but I think there's something in that. If you're the most powerful country in the region, then I think you expect to have a say in what other countries do and how it might affect their interest. Japan has always resisted that. Many Southeast Asian countries have internalised that view and tend to sort of recoil from conflict or sit on the fence. Look at the response to Ukraine. Japan has always resisted China being the top dog and dictating terms. How does Japan maintain its independence in that respect? It's by hewing close to the United States. Whether that's a sustainable strategy way out into the future, it's totally unpredictable.

Ali Moore:

Richard McGregor, thank you so much for talking to Ear to Asia. Before I let you go, and we did point out of course that your thoughts are in many publications. You are now with the Lowy Institute, but where can listeners find more of you?

Richard McGregor:

Well, I would only just give a plug for my books I'm afraid. I don't have any regular outlets, but if you buy my books, then it comes back to me in a few cents a book, many years later from the publishers. And so that's always valuable.

Ali Moore:

And of course all your articles are up as well, including those that you write for the Lowy Institute here in Australia. Richard McGregor, thank you very much for your time.

Richard McGregor:

Thank you very much.

Ali Moore:

Our guest has been Richard McGregor, Senior Fellow for East Asia at Lowy Institute. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne, Australia. You can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia by following us on the Apple Podcast app, Stitcher, Spotify, or Google podcasts. If you like the show, please rate and review it on Apple Podcasts. Every positive review helps new listeners find the show. And please help us by spreading the word on social media. This episode was recorded on the 3rd of March, 2022. Producers were Eric van Bommel and Kelvin Param of profactual.com. Ear to Asia is licenced under creative commons, copyright 2022, the University of Melbourne. I'm Ali Moore. Thanks for your company.

