

Interview - Céline Pajon

Written by E-International Relations

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Céline Pajon is Head of Japan Research at the Center for Asian Studies of the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), Paris, where she has been a Research Fellow since 2008. She analyses Japan's foreign and defence policy and follows the major domestic political debates. She also researches the evolution of international relations and the geostrategic setting of the Indo-Pacific region. Céline Pajon is an International Research Fellow with the Canon Institute for Global Studies (CIGS) in Tokyo. In 2016, she was a visiting fellow with the Japan Institute for International Affairs (JIIA), Tokyo. She graduated from the Graduate Institute of International Studies of Geneva and Sciences Po Lyon. She studied for two years in Japan, at Waseda University and Osaka University. Her latest publications include: *France and Japan: the Indo-Pacific as a springboard for a strategic partnership*, in Luis Simón & Ulrich Speck, *Natural partners? Europe, Japan and security in the Indo-Pacific*, and *The Japan-India Economic Partnership: A Politically-Driven Process* (with Isabelle Saint-Mézard).

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

It feels very exciting to work on Asian affairs at this very moment because we are witnessing a crucial shift in world order with the rise of China and the repositioning of the US. The way the competition between the two countries will evolve is key for the future of International relations (IR). So at this very moment, we have the privilege to follow a multi-dimensional transformation of IR. The very fluid international environment is challenging to understand and analyse. In this context, I believe the think tanks have a very important role to play to try to make sense and provide sober analysis to policymakers.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

My first encounter with Japan, back in 2000, when I spent a year as an exchange student in Waseda University, and then with Japanese studies was a decisive moment in shaping my vision of the world and IR. While I guess this can be said of other countries, ambiguity, contradictions, paradox and complexity are paramount features in the Japanese psyche. Hence, it imprinted upon me the impression that analysing Japanese politics, defence, diplomacy, and history requires looking at things in their entire complexity rather than trying to forcibly apply theories. I thus found the 'analytic eclecticism' approach developed by Peter J Katzenstein useful to better grasp the various, complex aspects of one issue, rather than looking through one or two theoretical lenses. This approach is the most relevant for me to understand the complexity of the IR.

How does the French Institute for International Relations impact the research and debate of Asia-Pacific and specifically, Japanese politics?

Institut Français des relations internationales (Ifri) has maintained a top-notch Centre for Asian Studies for years now. It has been able to provide extensive research on this region to a diversified public of academia, companies, administration and media. When I joined Ifri in 2008, French private and public actors focused on the Asian rising powers, such as China and India. At that time, bilateral relations with Japan were good, but not really dynamic. Japan was seen as a declining country whose time has passed. This changed after the Triple Disaster of March 2011: the earthquake, tsunami and the Fukushima nuclear accident prompted a renewed interest in the archipelago. The return

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of Shinzo Abe as a Prime minister in 2012 also helped to trigger interest and Japan came to be seen as a credible political and strategic partner. During all these years, Ifri has been instrumental in the Franco-Japanese rapprochement by providing a platform for 1.5 track exchanges and discussions where officials and experts from the two governments could freely discuss and debate topics of mutual interest. We have also been vigilant not to dedicate the bulk of our Asia expertise and research to China, for example, but to maintain a diversity of expertise on South Asia, Southeast Asia and Japan.

We have seen six years of Prime Minister Abe's "Abenomics" policies. What is your assessment of their impact on Japan's national and international politics?

When considering the three arrows of Abenomics (monetary stimulus, fiscal stimulus and structural reforms), the first two are showing their limits to boost the economy and the third has mixed results. Indeed, the very accommodating monetary policy of the Bank of Japan no longer has a very visible positive effect. Inflation is still very low. The debt repayment service is heavily weighing on the government budget. The new hike in consumption tax planned in October is expected to further impede domestic demand. The structural reforms aimed at liberalizing the energy and labour market have borne their first fruits, but the "womenomics", intended to promote women's work, are stumbling over attitudes that are still very patriarchal and the lack of concrete improvement of a work-life balance. Faced with these multiple difficulties, Prime Minister Abe has been promoting active economic diplomacy. In particular, the fact that Japan took the lead to finalize the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership after the US withdrawal of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) has demonstrated Tokyo's determination to be part of the rule-shapers for trade. Similarly, the conclusion of the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with the European Union in 2017 is a significant effort for favouring Japanese economic and strategic interests on the international stage.

Do you believe that increased Japanese assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific region has been effective?

The political stability under the mandate of Shinzo Abe, and the reforms he undertook to normalize the strategic posture of the country, certainly played a big role in strengthening the international profile of Japan. Tokyo was able to present itself as a central pillar and defender of a rules-based liberal order challenged by revisionist powers such as China. Japan acted very proactively by pushing for international mega trade agreements and unveiling a grand strategy to counterbalance China under the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) Strategy. In addition, Tokyo has been very active in reaching out to new diplomatic partners and building up strategic partnerships in and outside Asia.

It seems that this assertiveness has been quite effective indeed. One immediate success is that Japan now clearly appears as a potent and benevolent strategic partner on the international scene. This may have not been the case in the past, either because Japan was not really interested in investing diplomatically and strategically abroad, or because it lacked the means to do so. With Abe, both political will and means (including with the Security Legislation adopted in 2015) are enabling Japan to increase its international contribution. Of course, the rise of China and its maritime expansion have been a major trigger for Japan's normalization. In this regard, another major success for Japanese diplomacy is the endorsement of its FOIP vision by its closest partners: The United States, Australia and India. While each of these actors has its own perspective on the region, all four countries share a basic understanding of the importance of promoting freedom of navigation and plurality of alternatives for funding the connectivity of the region. Japan has been active in support of Southeast Asian countries building up their maritime or digital capacities for example. As a result, Japan is now a welcomed security actor in the region.

That said, difficulties are still looming – strategic rivalry, historical quarrels and territorial disputes still poison relations with China and South Korea. Tokyo is also struggling to manage its alliance with the US under the Trump administration. While Japan initiated the revision of the cooperation guidelines with the US back in 2015, which led to rebalancing and the expansion of the alliance, the lunatic nature of the current US President has been testing the ties. Security commitments have been reaffirmed but Tokyo found itself quite isolated by the bilateral summit diplomacy Trump launched with his North-Korean counterpart. Similarly, Washington's withdrawing of the TPP and its insistence to sign a bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA) is not aligned with Tokyo's best interests.

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Why has France increased its maritime security presence in the Asia-Pacific in recent years?

First, France has obvious sovereignty interests in the Indo-Pacific area: it has territories both in the Indian Ocean (La Réunion, the Scattered islands...) and the Pacific (New Caledonia, French Polynesia...) where around 1.5 million citizens live and in other countries in the region (approximately 200,000 people). Also, more than 90% of its large Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (9 million km²) is located in the Indo-Pacific, and France maintains a military presence of 7,000 personnel to take care of this vast area. As a result, French forces have been active in the region for a long time, but in recent years, more ships have been dispatched in the region and efforts have been made to ensure a regular presence in tense areas such as the South China Sea (since 2014) or the Taiwan Strait.

Several developments in the region served as a catalyst to prompt the definition of a French strategic vision for the Indo-Pacific and an enhanced presence in the region. One important trigger is the advance of China in the South China Sea and the risk it posed to the freedom of navigation, as well as the development of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that spreads all the way to the Indian Ocean and Europe. The opening of a large Chinese base in Djibouti in 2017 was an eye-opener. France is now aware that the Chinese strategy challenges its vision of the liberal order and its interests in the region.

In its approach to the Indo-Pacific, Paris is placing the priority on a broadly defined maritime security. France supports the strict application of UNCLOS (United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea), contributes to acting against crime at sea, and is keen on actively demonstrating its commitment to the freedom of navigation. In 2016, the statement of the then Minister of Defence Jean-Yves Le Drian at the Shangri-La Dialogue emphasized the need to discourage unilateral *coups de force* in the China seas, for fear that such actions might expand in other strategic areas like the Mediterranean Sea. While not taking sides on sovereignty matters, Paris has thus consistently exercised its Freedom of Navigation in the South China Sea in recent years through the passing of the Jeanne d'Arc mission or the surveillance frigates based in New Caledonia, and in recent years, in coordination with British or other European forces.

How would you describe the relationship between France and Japan? Post-Brexit, is there potential for France to become Japan's "Gateway to Europe"?

First, despite being geographically distant, France and Japan share a number of converging interests: The attachment to liberal principles and the rule of law and common concerns such as unilateral challenges to the international order, to nuclear proliferation, international terrorism, piracy, and so on. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, a nuclear power, a close US ally, and a resident power in the Indo-Pacific area, France stands out as a partner of choice for a Japan that is keen to normalize its defence posture and build up a network of like-minded partners vis à vis China.

The expansion of their security cooperation thus benefits from the convergence of two trends: Japan's will to diversify its strategic partners to help uphold the international liberal order and balance China and France's renewed interest to upgrade its international leadership and expand its security commitment in Asia, an area where it wants to be acknowledged as a responsible stakeholder. A certain convergence between the two countries' strategy for the Indo-Pacific is thus providing a new motive to develop bilateral security cooperation. Therefore, the security cooperation between the two countries has been growing, in particular in the maritime domain. Beyond this, France and Japan see eye to eye on a number of global issues and are closely coordinating as they respectively host the G7 and G20 Summit in 2019. This demonstrates that the partnership is now a real strategic one, encompassing political, economic and defence cooperation; not only bilaterally but also in third countries in Asia and in Africa.

Certainly, France cannot replace Britain as a gateway to Europe for Japanese businesses overnight. This said, in political terms, it already seems that France is considered as a priority country within Europe. The leadership of President Macron to promote multilateralism, ensure a stronger European Union and commit in Asia is playing a strong role. France is seen as a locomotive for the EU and this is strategically very important for Japan.

What are some of the challenges for the France-Japan strategic partnership?

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Regarding the partnership in the Indo-Pacific, France is taking great care of not antagonizing China by emphasizing an inclusive approach. Therefore, Japan's initiatives and rhetoric are sometimes seen in France as being too confrontational vis à vis Beijing. This perception gap on China is important and enduring, as Tokyo is still suspicious of Paris selling dual-use equipment to Beijing, despite the bilateral consultation forum on defence export controls set up in 2013 to reassure Japan. Moreover, Japan has been consistently asking France to clarify its stance vis à vis China, while Paris considers "megaphone diplomacy" to be counterproductive.

Other differences between the two countries can also emerge regarding the nature of the security challenges posed by Russia, as Tokyo has been courting Moscow despite the Crimea annexation in 2014. More generally, frustration can arise in Paris as Tokyo's commitment to shift from chequebook diplomacy to more tangible security contribution may be slow to concretize, and as Japan remains very much US-centred, in particular in terms of defence procurement.

What is the most important advice that you would give to young scholars studying international relations?

While I am not sure I am in a good position to provide advice, I would only encourage young scholars to persevere, be confident in their capacities and strive to build a network of benevolent senior experts who can help them in their professional achievements. Special attention should be paid to young female researchers. They might benefit from training or mentoring systems set up to promote women's networking and capacity building in the field of IR, like WIIS (Women in International Security).