



RCAS Commentary

Kishida's Visit to Thailand:

Significance to Regional Geopolitics in the GMS

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About RCAS

RCAS is a non-profit research organization focusing on the maritime issues and regional integration in the Indo-Pacific region. It is a newly-established institution founded in February 2022 by Dr. Nian Peng, Associate Professor of the School of Foreign Studies at Hainan Normal University, Haikou, China. We, at the moment, have an international research team with resident/non-resident researchers from China and other Asian states.

RCAS seizes the opportunity that China is building Hainan Free-Trade Port in which the Hainan Island will become an important window for China's opening up to the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean to become a leading research institute and think tank on maritime affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. So far, RCAS focuses on the maritime disputes and maritime cooperation in the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean, and various regional cooperation mechanisms such as BRI, LMC, RCEP and so on. It is committed to promoting the maritime cooperation, regional integration and academic exchanges in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

RCAS has received a number of research funding from universities and foundations, and conducted research programs of the South China Sea(SCS) dispute, China-South/Southeast Asian relations, BRI in South/Southeast Asia, terrorism/anti-terrorism in Afghanistan, and so on. RCAS researchers have won various awards from the Chinese Ministry of Commerce and the Hainan government.

RCAS has published nearly 10 books in Chinese and English, and more than 20 papers on SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives*(Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry*(Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic*(Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *International Pressures, Strategic Preference and Myanmar's China Policy since 1988*(Singapore: Springer Nature, 2020); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches*(2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988*(2021); *The Budding Indo-Myanmar Relations: Rising But Limited Challenges for China*(2019).

RCAS has also published hundreds of articles and been interviewed in various local and international media outlets such as Asia Centre in France, *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum(EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Lian He Zao Bao* and *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post(SCMP)* and *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *CGTN* and *Global Times* in China. RCAS researchers have actively participated in international conferences or study visits in the US, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, and other places. Welcome to visit our website: <http://www.rcas.top>.

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The diplomatic relationship between Japan and Thailand has been challenged by many factors in the last decades. The rise of China is one of the challenges. The Chinese government has stepped into Southeast Asia, particularly the Mekong subregion which comprises Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam through its bilateral relations and regional initiatives such as the Lancang-Mekong Co-operation (MLC).

Kishida Fumio's visit to Thailand between 1 and 2 May 2022 is his first official visit since Kishida took his PM position in 2020. The main objective of this visit is to celebrate the 130th-anniversary diplomatic relations between Japan and Thailand and to strengthen the relations. This visit is part of his tour to the UK, Italy, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam. This visit emphasises the importance of what Southeast Asia means to Japan from both economic and strategic perspectives. Japan is a very important economic partner of Thailand. In 2021, Japan is the 2nd largest trade partner to Thailand, whilst Thailand is the 5th largest trade partner to Japan.

This visit should be seen as a strategy that Japan aims to integrate the regional diplomatic relations that tackle many regional issues, including economic, political, and security issues. Japan approached Thailand as one of the main security partners in the region. The discussion between Kishida and Prayut Chan-o-cha, Prime Minister of Thailand, touched on many critical issues. One of the most significant milestones of this visit is the announcement of new defence ties. This includes the technology and military transfer from Japan. The Thai government anticipates an increase in the Japanese defence industry in Thailand. This move is different from what Japan moved in Vietnam and Indonesia. The substantial issues that Japan made with Vietnam and Indonesia focus on infrastructure development and energy. The expected military

transfer between Japan and Thailand reflects Japan's endeavour on balancing China in the subregion. We have witnessed the emerging engagement of China in the Mekong subregion in many ways. China initiated the LMC and launched many hard infrastructure development projects in Laos, and Cambodia.

However, when we consider the importance of Vietnam and Indonesia from a regional production network perspective, these two countries have received considerable interest from Japanese investors. Many studies have shown that the increase in minimum wage along with the uncertain political situation that has undergone for more than a decade in Thailand had a significant impact on the decision of Japanese investors to move out of Thailand. Vietnam and Indonesia are the two main options if they had to relocate the factory and investment. Kishida's visits to Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia, thereby, reflect how Japan keeps the relations with the three countries based on economic and business relations.

Nonetheless, Thailand is still a strong production base for Japanese manufacturers. Kishida visited KOSEN-KMITL, a higher education institute in Thailand that focuses on engineering. A survey by JETRO in Thailand revealed that many Japanese manufacturers in Thailand see the insufficient of engineers in Thailand as a constraint on economic and industrial development. In fact, not only did the KOSEN initiated by Japan, Thammasat University's SIIT was also kicked off and supported by Keidanren. Kishida's stop at KOSEN highlights how Japan is help developing human resources in Thailand to support economic and industrial development.

The visit to Thailand and other countries also emphasised what was Japan's position in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Kishida stressed how Japan values the rule-based international order which is also one of the key elements in the Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP). Thailand voted at the 11th Emergency Special Session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) to condemn Russia's aggression.

Not only did Kishida's tour promotes Japan's economic and political interests, but it also shed light on value-based diplomacy. Japan has been promoting a rules-based international order which can be seen in the idea of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP). The visit to Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia reflect how Japan would like to highlight the ideas of order through the dialogue on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and the South China Sea conflict. Hence, the visit to Southeast Asia is another key step for Japan in strengthening its relations with Southeast Asia whilst keeping enunciating the value-based diplomacy.

Kishida's visit to Southeast Asia, accordingly, help integrate and strengthen Japan's goals in help forming a strong regional arrangement through the development of economic and business co-operation, and the might of military co-operation. This helped regain Japan's leading position in the region which China has stepped into many development projects. In other words, the visit is how Japan is upholding its position in challenging regional geopolitics.

About Author



Dr. Narut Charoensri is Non-resident Fellow of RCAS, as well as Assistant Professor at Chiang Mai University, Thailand. He holds a Ph.D. in Japanese and Southeast Asian Studies at University of Leeds, UK. His main research interests are in the areas of International Politics of International Transport in East Asia, Economic Cooperation in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region, Japanese Foreign Policy towards Southeast Asia, International Political Economy of East Asia, and Comparative Regionalism. He published dozens of monographs, book chapters, research articles and conference papers in English and Thai, and got various research funds from the Chiang Mai University and Chulalongkorn University.