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Speaking to The Straits Times in an exclusive interview yesterday, ahead of a visit to Singapore next week, Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono said Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy was not intended to compete with China's Belt and Road Initiative or South Korea's New Southern Policy. PHOTO: INTERTELEMEDIA TOKYO



Trade and security 'separate issues' for US and Japan

TOKYO • Trade and security are separate issues that longstanding allies Japan and the United States know not to conflate, Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono has said.

"These are two different issues and I don't think anybody is mixing them up – be it in Tokyo or in Washington DC," he told The Straits Times yesterday.

Seeking to douse concerns that bilateral trade issues might have an adverse bearing on broader ties, he said: "In the past, there were many trade issues between the US and Japan, and nothing had any effect on the strategic alliance. We are not worried about that at all."

Japan's automakers remain in the crosshairs of US President Donald Trump's protectionist policies, with the US Commerce Department considering slapping 25 per cent tariffs, citing national security.

Fears over Mr Trump's protectionist policies have soured business sentiment in Japan, with exports to the US last month falling for the first time in 17 months.

The first round of new US-Japan Cabinet-level trade talks in Washington, planned for later this month, will likely be delayed to next month.

The US is expected to push for a bilateral trade deal, though Japan's top government spokesman, Mr Yoshihide Suga, told Bloomberg last Saturday that Tokyo will continue to resist US efforts.

Meanwhile, China and Japan have become unlikely bedfellows as among the world's loudest voices for multilateral trading systems.

Both countries are part of the 16-nation, Asean-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. China and Japan are also discussing a separate three-way free trade deal with South Korea.

"There has been some good news and we hope to conclude those agreements soon," Mr Kono said yesterday. "Trade agreements that involve Asia's two largest economies will have a significant impact on the economy in Asia."

Noting the growth in Chinese and South Korean tourists to Japan – with many of them repeat visitors not just to Tokyo, but also to other regions – he said that people-to-people exchanges are crucial to building trust, "whatever issues arise between governments".

Walter Sim

Asean at heart of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy: Kono

As maritime hub, Singapore can play big role in strategy, says Japan Foreign Minister

Walter Sim
Japan Correspondent
In Tokyo

Asean is at the heart of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy that seeks to promote the rule of law at sea and build high-quality infrastructure in areas across the Indian and Pacific oceans, Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono has said.

Speaking to The Straits Times in an exclusive interview yesterday, ahead of a visit to Singapore next week for meetings with his counterparts from Asean and its partners, Mr Kono said the strategy was not intended to compete with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or South Korea's New Southern Policy.

Singapore, which is a hub for vessels travelling between the Indian and Pacific oceans, has room to play "quite a big role", he said.

"It has very advanced capabilities for managing maritime transportation, and we can cooperate on anti-piracy and anti-terrorism (at) sea."

Singapore has not yet signed on

to the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, and Japan has been actively lobbying for the Republic's support.

The concept has also been articulated by the United States, India and Australia. And last month, Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan welcomed the affirmation by their leaders and officials at the Shangri-La Dialogue that Asean was at the centre of the strategy, but added that details have to be worked out and negotiated.

Yesterday, Mr Kono said that Japan wants to work with Asean to promote the rule of law on the sea, which is a key tenet of a free and open Indo-Pacific region.

"We would like to increase connectivity through high-quality infrastructure to get economies growing," he said. "And I think it is important for capacity-building for maritime law enforcement, disaster management or prevention, counter-piracy, counter-terrorism, and we would like to work with Asean to achieve those goals."

Japan's strategy has been seen by some observers as a means of con-

taining China's growing influence. But Mr Kono said the various regional infrastructure strategies can complement each other as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy – as a basis for global trade and economy – helps secure open sea lines of communication.

As such, it could be the "base for everyone's economic strategies", Mr Kono quipped, noting that the BRI and the New Southern Policy are also reliant on open seas.

Some experts have noted that Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy is inherently different from the version articulated by the US. Dr Alessio Patalano of King's College London, an expert on Japanese defence policy, said on Monday that the US version is explicitly aimed at containing China, and "has no capacity-building and is purely military, without any element of maintaining rule of law or infrastructure-building".

Mr Kono said the bilateral relationship between Japan and China is also steadily improving, noting that Chinese Premier Li Keqiang visited Tokyo for the trilateral summit in May, and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is planning to visit China by the end of this year.

"There are issues but we can manage both ways, and try to improve

the economic relationship," he said.

Mr Kono also said that Singapore is a very important strategic partner to Japan on economic issues, with both nations having become among the world's strongest cheerleaders for free trade. The Republic was Japan's first bilateral free trade partner in 2002, and the Japan-Singapore Economic Partnership Agreement is undergoing a third review.

Both countries, along with Mexico, have ratified the revised Trans-Pacific Partnership deal now known as CPTPP or TPP-11, which will go into force 60 days after three more countries complete their domestic procedures.

Mr Kono noted that Japan and Singapore share common values on trade and common concerns on security, while working together to help third countries in their development.

"There are things we need to work out between our countries but our economic and trade relationship go over, go beyond, the bilateral relationship," he said.

"Singapore and Japan are now leading rule-making in Asia, and so we want to treat this bilateral relationship as something special."

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SPECIALTIES

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MR TARO KONO, Japanese Foreign Minister, on Japan and Singapore's relationship.



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Connectivity key to Asean growth.
<http://str.sg/kono>

Japan, N. Korea leaders' meeting up in the air amid mixed signals on denuclearisation

TOKYO • Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono did not confirm nor deny domestic speculation that he might meet North Korean counterpart Ri Yong Ho in Singapore next week, amid mixed signals from Pyongyang on its vow to denuclearise.

He was speaking to The Straits Times hours after United States Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told lawmakers that North Korea was still making nuclear material, and days after a report showed Pyongyang has begun dismantling key facilities at a site used to develop engines for ballistic missiles.

Mr Kono will visit Singapore next week for meetings with Asean and regional counterparts. Mr Ri is also expected to be in the Republic for the Asean Regional Forum.

Mr Kono did say, however, that Japan and North Korea will eventu-

ally have to sit down and talk about how to resolve the longstanding abduction issue – though he said he had "no comment" on when exactly these talks might take place.

Tokyo and Pyongyang, which have no official ties, have been in a deadlock on this issue. Japan says there are 12 kidnapping victims unaccounted for, though North Korea has long insisted that eight of them have died, while the other four never entered the country.

US President Donald Trump had, following his Singapore summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un on June 12, told reporters that he had won a promise from Mr Kim that the abduction issue "will be worked on". Yet North Korea had provided little new information about the abductees when Japanese officials contacted Pyongyang last



Japanese policemen in protective gear at the port of Yokosuka yesterday checking for mock chemical agents in a multinational drill aimed at preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. PHOTO: REUTERS

month, Kyodo News reported last Saturday. Another recent report in the Nikkei said Pyongyang wants Tokyo to accept its findings that the cases have been closed.

There has been tentative talk in Japan, once concerned it was being left out of the fast-moving detente on the Korean peninsula, about the idea of a leaders' summit between Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Mr Kim. Domestic news media reported last month that this could take place as soon as September.

But when asked about the pre-conditions required for such a meeting, Mr Kono said yesterday: "We have been saying the same thing – we need to manage outstanding issues and then normalise the bilateral relationship. Once we normalise this bilateral relationship, we are ready to provide economic

assistance to North Korea. Our position has never been changed."

Nonetheless, Mr Kono was cautiously optimistic on the prospect of the North's denuclearisation, noting the declaration signed by Mr Trump and Mr Kim in Singapore.

"Sooner or later, I think the US and North Korea would agree on the process for denuclearisation and I think the international community needs to support this," he said. "The situation in East Asia is getting better, and if we can take care of those North Korean issues and if we normalise the relationship with North Korea, we hope to see the North Korea economy growing with assistance from Japan."

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