

Lead Interview © Japanese Diplomacy in 2025

## **Resolving Issues of Concern through “Dialogue and Harmony”**

Minister for Foreign Affairs

**IWAYA Takeshi**

Professor of Keio University, Chair of the editorial board of this journal

**HOSOYA Yuichi**



Photo: WATANABE Shigeki

**IWAYA Takeshi**

Born in 1957 in Beppu City, Oita Prefecture. Graduated from Waseda University. After serving as a member of the Oita Prefectural Assembly and in other roles, Mr. Iwaya was elected to the House of Representatives for the first time in the 39th general election in 1990. He is currently serving his tenth term. He has held various government positions, including Parliamentary Secretary for the Japan Defense Agency, State Minister for Foreign Affairs (2006–2007), and Minister of Defense (2018–2019). Within the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan, he has served in such capacities as Chairperson of the Research Commission on Security. He has been Minister for Foreign Affairs since October 2024.



HOSOYA Yuichi

Received a Master of International Studies from University of Birmingham Graduate School in 1996 and a PhD in Law from Keio University Graduate School of Law in 2000. Prof. Hosoya specializes in international politics and the history of British diplomacy. His publications include *Meiso suru Igrisu* [The Faltering United Kingdom], *Rekishininshiki to wa nanika* [What is Recognition of History?], and *Jishu dokuritsu to wa nanika* [What is Sovereign Independence?, Vol. I and II].

**Hosoya:** Last September, the Ishiba Cabinet was inaugurated, and you assumed office as Minister for Foreign Affairs. Since then, you have engaged in your duties with great energy, including visiting Peru, Ukraine, and Italy in November and China in December. Could you share your reflections looking back on these past four months?

**Iwaya:** It has truly been busy four months. My first overseas visit was to Lima, Peru for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Ministerial Meeting, after which I went straight to Ukraine. It was a demanding schedule. In one night and seven days, I flew approximately 441,000 kilometers, almost the equivalent of circling the globe. However, as Ukraine is a critical place in international affairs discourse, I had hoped to hear from the parties and see the situation with my own eyes as soon as possible. The visit reaffirmed for me the importance of seeing the situation on the ground firsthand. Later, in that same month, I attended the G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Italy.

In December, I visited China and held a meeting with Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi. I had also hoped to hold a foreign ministers' meeting with him in person at the earliest possible date. I met directly with my global counterparts at such international meetings and fora, and I feel confident about what came out of these past four months.

### **Drawing from the Wisdom of ISHIBASHI Tanzan's "Realistic Pacifism"**

**Hosoya:** You have served in key government positions in diplomacy and security, including Minister of Defense and State Minister for Foreign Affairs. Based on your experience, what is your outlook for the international situation and Japanese diplomacy in 2025?

**Iwaya:** Japanese diplomacy is playing a growing role amid an international situation that is constantly changing and becoming increasingly severe. I intend to actively conduct diplomacy centered on “dialogue and harmony,” with a view to safeguarding our national interests, enhancing Japan’s presence, and contributing to peace and prosperity in the world.

I expect that the international situation will continue to be severe in 2025, including the situations in Ukraine and the Middle East and the security environment in East Asia. An additional factor will be the inauguration of the Trump administration in the U.S. In 2024, last year, key elections were held in the U.S., as well as in other parts of the globe. Generally speaking, various countries are facing deepening domestic divisions and heightening social tensions, and we need to closely observe how domestic affairs in these countries will affect the international situation. Nevertheless, even under these challenging circumstances, Japan’s basic diplomatic approach will not and must not change. By positioning the Japan-U.S. Alliance as the cornerstone, and building multilayered and multifaceted cooperation with our ally and like-minded countries, Japan will aim to uphold a free and open international order based on the rule of law. This will realize peace and stability in Japan, the region, and the world. I will advance Japanese diplomacy with this as our goal.

Furthermore, Japan needs to advance fine-tuned cooperation with the Global South to prevent divisions in the international community. I will advance diplomacy based on dialogue and harmony, ensuring that solutions can be found for each specific issue.

**Hosoya:** In Japan, the ruling parties lost their majority in the last general election, putting the Ishiba administration in a difficult position to run the government. How will this affect diplomacy?

**Iwaya:** The ruling parties received a harsh judgment from the people. Thus, there may be concerns that it could affect the stability and continuity of our diplomacy. Stability and continuity in diplomacy are critical, so we must work meticulously to build consensus across party lines. I have always believed that the ideal political situation is one in which the ruling and opposition parties do not significantly differ in their policies and recognition on matters of diplomacy and security, even if they have different views on domestic affairs. To turn adversity into opportunity, we need to engage with the opposition parties through dialogue and build a broad consensus on diplomacy and security.



On December 25, 2024, Foreign Minister Iwaya (left) visited Beijing and held a meeting with Minister of Foreign

Affairs Wang Yi. The two ministers affirmed the importance of frequent communication between the two foreign ministers and confirmed that they would realize Minister Wang's visit to Japan as early as possible.

**Hosoya:** Political division and polarization appear to be a global trend. This tendency can be seen in nearly all the G7 countries. Among them, Italy, which held the G7 presidency last year, and Japan, which held the presidency the year before last, could be said to have relatively stable political foundations. From that standpoint as well, it would be highly meaningful if domestic consensus can be fostered on foreign and security policy in Japan.

Additionally, your emphasis on a "multilayered and multifaceted" approach to building a free and open international order is important. I hope that, with this approach at the core, Japan will take the lead in working with like-minded countries and demonstrate leadership in shaping the international order.

**Iwaya:** In that regard, I am currently particularly mindful of the political stance known as "realistic pacifism" advocated by ISHIBASHI Tanzan. In an era when militarism was at its height, Ishibashi continued to warn against expansionist tendencies and argued that Japan should relinquish its colonies to shift the course of global affairs. This year marks 80 years since the end of World War II, yet, unfortunately, conflicts still persist around the world. At this turning point, as the international order is wavering and even breaking down, I intend to carefully consider what role Japanese diplomacy should play in contributing to peace in the world, drawing from the wisdom of ISHIBASHI Tanzan.

### **Japan-U.S. Relations: The Need to Meet the 2% GDP Target for Defense Expenditures**

**Hosoya:** I would like to ask about Japan-U.S. relations. The second Trump administration is underway. During the election campaign, under the slogan "Make America Great Again (MAGA)," President Trump frequently made tough demands of allies and expressed his intention to pursue protectionist trade policies, raising considerable alarm in Europe and Japan. During the first Trump administration, as Minister of Defense, you made efforts to strengthen and deepen the Alliance, including the Japan-U.S. "2+2" meeting. What is your outlook for Japan's relationship with the second Trump administration?

**Iwaya:** In light of my experience during the first Trump administration, I expect that there will continue to be broad understanding and bi-partisan support for the importance of the Japan-U.S. Alliance in the U.S. during the second Trump administration. The Japan-U.S. Alliance serves as a public good, not only for our two countries but also for the entire Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). In this sense, the Alliance holds important significance for the region and the world. As global partners, Japan and the U.S. must continue to further strengthen the Japan-U.S. Alliance, which contributes to peace, stability, and prosperity in the region and the international community.

**Hosoya:** Even with the unchanging importance of the Japan-U.S. Alliance, there are anxieties and concerns surrounding the Trump administration's stances, such as on burden-sharing for maintaining the Alliance, continuation of Japan-U.S.-Republic of Korea (ROK) cooperation, and uniform additional tariffs.

**Iwaya:** I will refrain from speculating on individual policies. That said, it is important that Japan and the U.S. exchange candid views on a wide range of fields, including diplomacy, security, and the economy, and enhance each other's strengths in a synergistic manner, in pursuit of further developing mutual trust and cooperation. In any case, we will work closely with the second Trump administration as well to elevate the Japan-U.S. Alliance, which is the foundation of international peace and stability, to new heights.

While the U.S. is still a global superpower, it is also true that, relatively speaking, a different situation from the past is emerging. It is a fact that, to date, an excessive burden has been placed on the U.S. to maintain the international order, and Japan needs to take on a greater share of that responsibility. As part of such effort, we are taking the necessary measures in accordance with our National Security Strategy such that our defense expenditures will reach 2% of GDP. Japan will continue to strive to make the Japan-U.S. Alliance more mutually complementary, while steadily fulfilling Japan's own role.

### **Visit to Ukraine and Importance of Providing Steady Support**

**Hosoya:** I would also like to ask about global issues. It will soon be three years since Russia launched its aggression against Ukraine. You recently visited the country. What did you take away from your visit?

**Iwaya:** During my visit in November, I saw the site of the Bucha massacre, as well as the bridge over Irpin River, which the Ukrainian side destroyed to halt the advance of Russian tanks. Sandbags were stacked all over the Presidential Office in Kyiv, where I met with President Zelenskyy. They were a vivid reminder that the country is at war. The day after we left Kyiv, Russia launched another large-scale attack. This visit made me acutely aware of the severe situation in Ukraine, where the war has been drawn out for over 1,000 days. Furthermore, through my substantive discussions with Ukrainian dignitaries, including President Zelenskyy and Minister for Foreign Affairs Sybiha, I felt renewed conviction that unilateral changes to the status quo by force should never be allowed anywhere in the world, and that a just and lasting peace must be restored in Ukraine as soon as possible.

**Hosoya:** What are your thoughts on future support for Ukraine?

**Iwaya:** Japan has so far announced more than 12 billion USD support in total in the fields of humanitarian assistance, finance, and recovery and reconstruction, and has steadily implemented this assistance. Additionally, during my recent meeting with First Deputy Prime Minister - Minister of Economy Yuliia Svyrydenko of Ukraine, who was visiting Japan, I conveyed my expectations that Japanese companies' engagement in the recovery and reconstruction of Ukraine would make further progress. By effectively working on such support for Ukraine, Japan will demonstrate that it continues to stand with Ukraine and will firmly support the restoration of peace, recovery, and reconstruction in the country.

Before the onset of winter, Russia has continued to attack power infrastructure in Ukraine, causing significant damage to civilian infrastructure, including energy-related facilities. Japan continues to prioritize humanitarian assistance, including energy supply assistance such as the delivery of gas turbines and small-scale power generators,

and has just decided to extend 26.9 billion yen in additional assistance for Ukraine and neighboring countries.

**Hosoya:** The Trump administration is anticipated to make active efforts to realize a ceasefire and bring peace in Ukraine.

**Iwaya:** I cannot speculate on the Trump administration's intentions at this stage. In any case, Japan will work closely with the international community, including the U.S. and the G7, toward restoring a just and lasting peace in Ukraine.

**Hosoya:** I believe your visit to Ukraine sent a strong message that Japan continues to stand with Ukraine. In addition, "a just and lasting peace" will surely become critical keywords in exploring a ceasefire and peace in Ukraine.

On the subject of conflicts, the conflict in Gaza has also created turmoil. How will Japan engage in the situation in Gaza?

**Iwaya:** As with Ukraine, we are deeply concerned about the situation in the Gaza Strip. In particular, the humanitarian situation is of extreme concern. Japan has been urging all parties, including Israel, to avoid any further escalation of the situation and improve the humanitarian situation in accordance with international humanitarian law, and has provided support to this end. We will continue to contribute to the realization of peace and stability in Gaza and the Middle East region in 2025. \*

### **Promoting Dialogue between Japan and China at All Levels**

**Hosoya:** I would also like to ask about Japan's efforts for achieving stability in the Indo-Pacific. My first question is about Japan-China relations. Prime Minister Ishiba held a summit meeting with President Xi Jinping in Lima last November, while you visited Beijing and held a meeting with Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi in December. These developments suggest that there is a growing momentum for dialogue. What is your vision for Japan's diplomacy toward China?

**Iwaya:** During the summit meeting between Prime Minister Ishiba and President Xi Jinping in November, the two leaders confirmed that Japan and China will comprehensively promote a "Mutually Beneficial Relationship Based on Common Strategic Interests" and build "constructive and stable Japan-China relations." My recent visit to China, which followed that meeting, can be considered the first step in translating the discussions at the summit meeting into concrete actions and moving them forward. We will continue to hold more high-level exchanges to reduce issues and concerns between the two countries and increase cooperation and coordination. In particular, during my meeting with Foreign Minister Wang, we confirmed the need for the foreign ministers of Japan and China to make frequent mutual visits and engage in candid exchanges of views and communication. We hope to realize Foreign Minister Wang's visit to Japan early this year. We also confirmed that we would hold a Japan-China high-level economic dialogue on the occasion of the Minister's visit.

**Hosoya:** The importance of dialogue goes without saying. At the same time, there are numerous concerns between Japan and China, including China's maritime expansion in the East and South China Seas, buildup of armaments including nuclear weapons, detention of Japanese nationals, and various issues surrounding economic security. Furthermore, the people in Japan and China do not have a favorable sentiment toward each other. How do you intend to improve this situation?

**Iwaya:** Certainly, we will say what needs to be said. We have clearly communicated to China the points you just raised. Through persistent dialogue, we will resolve them one at a time. Since assuming office, Prime Minister Ishiba has reiterated that he attaches importance to "the understanding and empathy of the public." I believe the same can be said for diplomacy, especially Japan-China relations. During my stay in Beijing, the Second Japan-China High-Level People-to-People and Cultural Exchange Dialogue was held, which I attended along with Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology ABE Toshiko. We need to further strengthen communication between the two countries in a wide range of fields and at various levels. As Foreign Minister, I will make efforts to ensure that the people of both countries welcome the development of Japan-China relations.

According to the Japan-China Joint Public Opinion Poll conducted by The Genron NPO every year, nearly 90% of the Japanese and Chinese public do not have a favorable view of the other. I shared my concern to Premier Li Qiang and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, stating that this was a serious situation. Both shared the same recognition as me. There have not been enough exchanges at various levels, which has worsened how each side thinks about the other, and this in turn has further strained diplomatic relations. We need to steadily promote dialogue at various levels.

### **ROK, an Important Partner Irrespective of the Political Situation**

**Hosoya:** Turning to Northeast Asia, North Korea has been deepening its relations with Russia, including the deployment of its troops on the battlefield against Ukraine. In addition, there are reports that North Korea has been advancing nuclear and missile development. How does Japan perceive the current situation in North Korea, and how does Japan intend to deal with it?

**Iwaya:** North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile development threatens the peace and security of Japan and the international community, and is totally unacceptable. We are also seriously concerned about the engagement of North Korean troops in combat against Ukraine. We have consistently emphasized that the security of the Euro-Atlantic and the Asia-Pacific is inextricably inseparable, and a situation that attests to this has now emerged. We strongly condemn the recent advancement of the military cooperation between Russia and North Korea. Japan will make every efforts to gather and analyze the necessary information and conduct monitoring and surveillance. At the same time, we will cooperate and coordinate with the international community to advance the full implementation of the United Nations Security Council resolutions and pursue the complete abandonment of North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

**Hosoya:** The key here will be Japan's relations with the ROK. This year will mark the 60th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations. Japan-ROK relations, as well as Japan-U.S.-ROK relations, improved dramatically during the Kishida administration. However, the situation has become increasingly fluid, with changes in administration in both Japan and the U.S., and with the ROK President's declaration of martial law and subsequent political turmoil in the ROK. How do you intend to maintain and further develop Japan-ROK relations and Japan-U.S.-ROK relations?

**Iwaya:** The Government follows recent developments in the ROK with great interest. The ROK is an important neighbor and partner for Japan, and the importance of Japan-ROK relations will not change under any circumstances under the current strategic environment. Strategic coordination among Japan, the U.S., and the ROK has also become more necessary than ever. Accordingly, we will continue to work closely with the ROK. Recently, Prime Minister Ishiba spoke over the phone with Acting President Han Duck-soo, and they concurred on the importance of Japan-ROK relations. I myself am in frequent contact with Minister of Foreign Affairs Cho Tae-yul. Our two sides reaffirmed the importance of continued close cooperation between Japan and the ROK, as well as among Japan, the U.S., and the ROK, and I will strive to further strengthen this cooperation. Additionally, as this year is the milestone 60th year since the normalization of Japan-ROK relations, we will also proceed as scheduled with the preparations for the 60th anniversary programs to further promote people-to-people exchanges.

**Hosoya:** Lastly, could you share your views on the FOIP, which I believe will remain an important diplomatic principle or strategy for Japanese diplomacy?

**Iwaya:** As the international community faces a serious and grave challenge to the rule of law, the FOIP vision has gained further importance. Japan is firmly committed to upholding an international order based on the rule of law and leading the efforts to further ensure security and stability in the region.

To this end, based on the Japan-U.S. Alliance, we intend to further enhance cooperation with our ally and like-minded countries, including the G7, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Australia, India, the ROK, the European Union (EU), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), as well as expand practical minilateral cooperation, including Japan-Australia-India-U.S. (Quad), Japan-U.S.-ROK, and Japan-U.S.-Philippines cooperation. As part of these efforts, it is also essential to work with a range of countries that include the Global South, such as Southeast Asian countries, Pacific Island countries, and African countries, and Japan will pursue a multilayered and multifaceted diplomacy.

In particular, ASEAN is at the heart of the Indo-Pacific and located at a geopolitically strategic point. Prime Minister Ishiba attended the ASEAN-related Summit Meetings for his first overseas visit as Prime Minister in October and visited Malaysia and Indonesia this January. We will promote Japan-ASEAN cooperation with the intention of paving the way for the future together as trusted partners with "heart to heart" connection.

Furthermore, the Ninth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD 9) will be held in Yokohama this August. Japan has long supported the development of African countries and will continue to pursue fine-tuned initiatives that consider the regional circumstances of Africa. I believe that now is the time for Japanese

diplomacy to fully play its role, through such efforts, to rebuild an international order that firmly upholds the rule of law, and to restore peace and stability in the world.

\*The Government of Japan issued a Statement by Foreign Minister IWAYA Takeshi that welcomes the agreement, announced on January 15, between Israel and Hamas on the release of hostages and ceasefire.