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S'pore a key ally as Japan seeks close ties with Asean amid rising geopolitical risks: Hayashi



Japan's Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi (left) is seen as a potential successor to Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. PHOTO: AFP



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SINGAPORE - Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi, 61, is fronting Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) at a critical time.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has sparked a global food and energy crisis, and China's foreign policy assertiveness has rattled the Western-led international order that has been the bedrock for regional security for decades.

Mr Hayashi - a veteran politician and a law graduate from the University of Tokyo with a Master's in Public Administration from Harvard John F Kennedy School of Government - is seen as a potential successor to Prime Minister Fumio Kishida.

In an interview with The Straits Times before his first official trip to Singapore on Saturday, he touched on strategic and bilateral issues. Here are some excerpts.

Q: Singapore and Japan were among the few Asian countries to condemn Russia for invading Ukraine. How do you see Singapore's role as a partner in defence and security issues amid sharp challenges in preserving the world order?

We strongly condemn the purported "referenda" as well as the purported "incorporation" of Ukraine (territories) by Russia, which violate Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and are in breach of international law, and shall never be recognised.

Singapore consistently takes a firm stand against Russian aggression. We will continue to work firmly on the two pillars of strong sanctions against Russia and support for Ukraine, in cooperation with Singapore and the international community.

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We will also deepen our cooperation with Singapore on issues such as the global food crisis and energy, which are caused by Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

The security environment surrounding us is becoming increasingly severe, not only with regard to the situation in Ukraine, but also with regard to North Korea's nuclear and missile development and its attempts to unilaterally change the status quo in the East China Sea and the South China Sea against a backdrop of force.

It is the maintenance and strengthening of a free and open international order based on the rule of law that will bring peace and prosperity not only for Japan and Singapore, but also for the international community as a whole.

With this in mind, Japan is promoting efforts to realise a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). Japan supports the Asean Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), which shares many fundamental principles with the FOIP, and will continue to promote concrete cooperation with Singapore and other countries to realise both initiatives.

Japan would also like to deepen its cooperation with Singapore in defence and security matters, including efforts towards the early conclusion of a Defence Equipment and Technology Transfer Agreement.

Q: It has been 20 years since the Japan-Singapore Economic Partnership Agreement (JSEPA) was effected. What are the milestones ahead?

The Japan-Singapore Economic Partnership Agreement (JSEPA) was the first bilateral EPA concluded by Japan... Under JSEPA, Japan believes that it is important for both Japan and Singapore to play a flagship role in the areas of free trade, digital, climate change and revitalising

people-to-people flows, and contribute to the strengthening of economic relations in the region through their efforts.

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Q: What value do you see in multilateral frameworks in ensuring a stable economic order at a time of great upheaval?

Currently, both Japan and Singapore are members of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), and [Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership \(RCEP\)](#). These will play an important role in expanding the free and fair economic order that forms the basis for peace and prosperity in the region.

In particular, with regard to the CPTPP, it is essential to maintain its high standards, as well as to uphold the spirit and principle of not tolerating economic coercion and unfair trade practices.

In addition, contributing to the progress of IPEF, discussions to strengthen the US involvement in the regional economic order and ensuring full implementation of the RCEP agreement are also important. Through a framework in which both Japan and Singapore participate, we will continue to work together to maintain and strengthen a free and fair economic order in the region.

Q: Can there be meaningful joint steps to shore up food and energy supply chains?

We are deeply concerned about the energy and food crisis aggravated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Access to affordable food and energy is a basic human need, but now more than ever, this is under threat. The international community needs to work together to ensure that each and every human being has access to this food and energy.

As a hub for maritime logistics, Singapore is regarded as a major player in the global supply chain, and we look forward to its continued role.

Bearing in mind that Japan will be chairing the G-7 next year, we would like to lead the international community's discussion on ensuring food and energy security and support for vulnerable countries, in cooperation with the international community.

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Q: How will travel links between Japan and Singapore be enhanced in the near future?

Cross-border travel between the two countries is important. People-to-people exchanges are an important pillar of relations between countries.

Prior to the pandemic, approximately 490,000 people, or about one tenth of Singapore's total population, visited Japan annually. So, we are happy that Japan is loved by Singaporeans as a travel destination.

From Oct 11, Singaporeans can once again make individual trips to Japan without obtaining a visa. We hope that this relaxation will lead to a revitalisation of travel between Japan and Singapore. I would like to extend a warm welcome to Singaporeans.

Dialogue has been taking place between the authorities of both countries on the future enhancement of air connectivity between Japan and Singapore, including Haneda Airport (which is closer to downtown Tokyo than Narita Airport), and we look forward to cooperation between the authorities.

I am confident that the exchange of people-to-people exchanges will further deepen mutual understanding between Japan and Singapore and contribute to further strengthening the multi-layered bilateral relationship.

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Q: As Japan-Asean ties mark a golden jubilee next year, what will Japan's relationship with the region be like in the face of an increasingly assertive China in the Indo-Pacific?

In its half-century of relations with Asean, Japan has not only been a close business partner, but also a true friend with a heart-to-heart connection, working together for peace, stability and prosperity in the region.

In addition, Japan has fully supported the further deepening of Asean integration in various fields over the years, including assistance in correcting disparities within the region through Official Development Assistance (which provides aid to developing nations) and the Japan-Asean Integration Fund (which promotes Asean integration efforts and cooperation with Japan).

The free and open international order based on the rule of law is currently being seriously challenged by Russia's aggression against Ukraine and attempts to unilaterally change the status quo by force.

Now is the time for Japan and Asean to work closely together and strengthen cooperation. In particular, the FOIP promoted by Japan and the AOIP also share the fundamental principles of openness, transparency, inclusiveness and rule of law. Japan supports the AOIP and will promote cooperation through it.

As we mark the historic milestone of the 50th anniversary of Asean-Japan friendship and cooperation next year, we can together develop a new vision and take new steps forward together.

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