

Tokyo's CRAZY New Policies: Power Grab & Economic Collapse | Aya Ikegame

The cracks in Japan's "everything is fine" pretense policies are starting to show. The country can't import some very essential goods anymore and the trend is not looking good. On top of that, the Takaichi's LDP government chose some political fights at home that are alienating her voter base. Professor Aya Ikegame of Kyoto University discusses Japan's oil shortages, the government's response, and the political strength of Sanae Takaichi. They examine the debate over Japan's imperial succession, the role of party power brokers, relations with China, military policy, and the weak state of the opposition. They also discuss social media campaigning, local elections, and the future of the LDP. Links: Aya Ikegame – Personal Website <https://ayaikegame.com> Aya Ikegame – University Profile <https://www.ioc.u-tokyo.ac.jp/en/faculty/ayaikegame/> Neutrality Studies substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> Merch: <https://neutralitystudies.com/shop> Donation: <https://neutralitystudies.com/donate> Timestamps: 00:00:00 Introduction 00:01:31 Japan's oil shortage and daily impact 00:04:55 Oil supplies from Iran and Russia 00:07:53 Support Neutrality Studies 00:08:16 Takaichi's landslide and weak opposition 00:10:52 Three controversial new laws 00:16:41 Imperial succession and female emperors 00:25:02 The emperor, peace, and political power 00:37:04 Takaichi's leadership and public image 00:38:35 Taiwan, China, and Japan's foreign policy 00:47:39 Japan's military and North Korea fears 00:50:02 Nuclear policy and the LDP's future 00:54:10 The opposition and social media campaigning

#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody, to Neutrality Studies. Today, for the first time with a fellow academic at Kyoto University, I'm talking to Professor Aya Ikegame at the Graduate School of African and Asian Area Studies at my own university in Kyoto. Aya, welcome.

#Aya Ikegame

Hi, thank you for having me.

#Pascal

Thank you very much for saying yes to this. We were introduced by a common colleague and friend, and it's wonderful to have, for the first time, somebody who's also at Kyoto University. So thanks very much. And let's maybe start with just a tiny little bit of your background. You are actually an expert on South Asia and Asia in general, right?

#Aya Ikegame

Yes, and particularly on India and southern India. So I'm an India specialist, and I'm a social scientist.

#Pascal

And you also keep a close eye on what's happening in Japan politically, since we are all political beings, more or less, at the university. Can you give us a little bit of just an update of where Japan is now with the Iran war, you know, and the oil shock that actually also reached Japan? The last thing I know is Japan dipped into its strategic reserves. But what's currently going on, actually?

#Aya Ikegame

Okay, so 97% of our oil we need comes through the Strait of Hormuz. So compared to Europe and the United States, we were really, really hit by this war on Iran. But the government keeps on telling us that we have a huge reserve of petrol for 178 days, or however many days. Actually, nobody knows. So actually, we should be feeling that way, you know, the influence of this petrol shortage. But the government is trying to, you know, keep the surface: there's nothing wrong, there's nothing to worry about.

So most people in Japan may not be feeling the effect of it, but actually it is affecting our lives. So it is a little bit odd situation because the government is pouring subsidies into the price of petrol. So the petrol price is artificially kept very low and should be probably 20–30% more than what it is now. But shortages, for example, naphtha, a byproduct of petrol, have a lot of consequences. So, for example, a lot of construction sites are being stopped because they can't get important, for example, paint thinner. They can't get paint thinner.

#Pascal

Paint thinner. Okay.

#Aya Ikegame

Thinner, yes. So they can't really paint inside the house or outside the house. And, for example, what we call unit baths. So, you know, all these bathrooms and bathtubs and showers and et cetera, it's all made out of plastic. And they can't make any more. So, for example, Toto, it is the number one company who makes this kind of baths, bath stops, and kitchenettes and et cetera, et cetera. They can't supply. So supply has been stopped. But still, government is denying, no, no, no, no, no. We have enough naphtha. We can make enough, you know, petrol-related products. But actually, people working in construction companies, construction sites, they were complaining.

#Pascal

Yeah. Last weekend, for the first time in a convenience store, I saw silver-packaged potato chips. And I was like, "Oh, what is that?" And it's like, yeah, they cannot make the color anymore. So it's just like the bare silver and grayscale in which they are now selling potato chips. So this is like one of the first cracks in this story, isn't it? Yes.

#Aya Ikegame

Yeah, but then the government says this was Calbee. This is the largest company which makes these crisps and potato chips. But the government says, no, no, no, that's their publicity stunt, which is just shocking. So the government is completely in denial of petrol shortages. Yeah.

#Pascal

There were a couple of attempts by Japan to find new ways to supply themselves. I think, on the one hand, they tried with Iran to actually have a couple of ships go through. And on the other hand, they've also tried to buy again a bit of oil from Russia. Can you tell us anything of how much, do you think, or how much do we know about oil that actually managed to reach Japan?

#Aya Ikegame

Yeah, we don't know exactly because this is not necessarily the government doing. Individual oil companies try to do their best. And interestingly, Japan always had a good relationship with Iran, which not many people know of. And somehow the United States allows us to do that. And we have some historical reason to be in a good relation with Iran. And so the Iranian government keeps on saying that, you know, if you ask, Japanese ships can go through. But the Takaiji government never asked. So individual companies seem to be negotiating with the Iranian government. And so a couple of ships went through, but not everybody.

#Pascal

Ah, so Takaichi is maybe at the point where she tries to be as friendly to Mr. Trump as possible. And on the other hand, on the lower level, they're going like crazy and trying to do whatever they can in order to somehow manage the situation anyhow.

#Aya Ikegame

Yes, but that's really like a drop in the ocean. So two or three ships managed to come through, but the amount of petrol they were carrying was just like one day and a half in total or something.

#Pascal

So, isn't that causing any kind of, you know, bad feelings toward the United States? Because this is an absolutely, utterly unnecessary war that was clearly started by them, and now it's hitting Japan pretty hard. On the one hand, I understand that Takaichi cannot say a bad word. On the other hand, it would only be natural that people get very grumpy. Do you have any information about that?

#Aya Ikegame

First of all, Japanese people are not politically so aware of what's going on. So actually, you will be very surprised. Most Japanese, they don't know what's going on in Iran. They don't even know what's going on in Russia either, or Ukraine either. So that's the situation. They are very naive, politically very naive. And the government is really hiding this news. And the media is not reporting in a big way. So they don't really connect what's going on in Iran and what's happening in Japan. For example, the falling value of the yen and rising food prices. They don't really connect these two together. So that's actually saving the Takaichi government.

#Pascal

Hey, just a very quick note. The best way to support this channel is by signing up for my free Substack. You can also help with a paid subscription there, or you can get some of our new merch on neutralitystudies.com. Links below. See you there. So she won this huge landslide victory in December last year, right? I mean, it was a surprise, but just how large it was. She dissolved Parliament and got her vote, and she got a confirmation that was stronger than what Mr. Abe got in 2015, I believe, when he won his landslide victory. Yes. And now it has been eight months. She's in power. She has a two-thirds majority. Isn't this now the moment when the opposition party could start using a couple of these things in order to undermine this confidence? What's happening on the parliamentary stage?

#Aya Ikegame

The problem is the opposition parties are very weak and pretty much destroyed, especially in the lower house. So most of the veteran politicians from the Constitutional Democratic Party, which is a liberal, you know, center-left party, they aren't there anymore, practically. Right. And so some Komeito, former Komeito, which is basically Soka Gakkai, which is one of the largest religious sects in Japan. And their parliamentarians were kind of liberal, but still right of the center. So they don't necessarily raise their strong voice against the Takaichi government. So the opposition is very weak. That's why the anti-Takaichi feeling hasn't been translated into a proper political opposition.

#Pascal

Yeah, she's not in trouble at all over here, right? I mean, eight months, I thought the chances for a scandal to break out or something similar, you know, trouble with the economy, would be quite

high. And because she owns everything, right? She has a two-thirds majority, a huge victory. So anything that happens is on her shoulders. But so far, it's been pretty smooth sailing for her, hasn't it?

#Aya Ikegame

Although many newspapers and other companies who do these popularity data surveys, they say her popularity is going down, and actually dropping quite rapidly. That's partly because what she did when she passed recent regulations through parliament was just so unnecessary and so silly.

#Pascal

Tell us about this. That legislation is fascinating because it's so quirky. Can you tell us about it?

#Aya Ikegame

Okay, so the three regulations, very controversial, which were so unnecessary and not at all urgent, but somehow she pushed through. One is the sub-capitals regulation. So, to make other cities a sub-capital apart from Tokyo. But we don't have any legal definition of the capital city. The emperor just moved to Tokyo at the time of the Meiji Restoration, but there's no regulation to make Tokyo the capital of Japan, despite the fact that now we have a law saying that we can have sub-capitals.

#Pascal

So Japan has no official capital by law, but has official sub-capitals.

#Aya Ikegame

Okay, great. We can have, but then we don't know how many sub-capitals we have. No, there's no discussion. And where the money comes from, no discussion.

#Pascal

What does she want to do with sub-capitals? Does she want to send a couple of government agencies to work there? Like, I don't know, Ministry of Foreign Affairs now goes to Osaka. What's the idea?

#Aya Ikegame

We don't know. There's no concrete discussion. But the main thing is that Takaichi wanted to say thank you to Ishin. This is a Restoration Party from Osaka. It's a regional party. They're very aggressive. They're a far-right political party. They wanted Osaka to have capital status.

#Pascal

Okay.

#Aya Ikegame

So that they can tap into not just regional tax income, but central government money.

#Pascal

Is it also a little bit about pride? You know, in Japanese language, Tokyo is the only to, actually, of the prefectures, and Osaka always was kind of angry because Osaka is a fu, right? And they would love to be a to. Is it about that? Is it this kind of, like, give them a little something in order to bribe them to keep them on board?

#Aya Ikegame

Yes, absolutely. That's it. That's it.

#Pascal

But, you know, this has precedent as well, right? There's a lot of Japanese prime ministers who build Shinkansen, like high-speed bullet train lines into nowhere, just in order to give their constituency something and shower money on them.

#Aya Ikegame

Absolutely. Absolutely. Basically, the Japanese economy is not a really capitalist, competitive economy at all. This is very much kind of like a subsidy-based economy. So if you can get subsidies from the government, then you can run almost anything. So just tapping into state money is so important. So Osaka wants to do that. And also, of course, there is some sort of pride that the Osaka people want to be like Tokyo. I don't know why they have such an inferiority complex, but they do. And so, but the joke is, like, both of us are living in Kyoto. The Kyoto governor recently said that, you know, he was asked, "Are you going for this sub-capital thing?" You know, because so many other governors were, you know, putting their hands up: "Oh, we want to become a sub-capital, we want to become..." And this governor, Nishiwaki, Mr. Nishiwaki, said, "Well, we heard that so many Kyoto people saying that Kyoto is already the capital. Hence, we don't have to become a capital."

#Pascal

Everybody, I need to explain to you: when the emperor moved from Kyoto to Tokyo about 150 years ago, the Kyoto people were all saying, like, "Well, we will wait until you come back because we know we are the true capital." And if you walk through the streets of Kyoto, you still feel that very much. People are just waiting. The capital is just, you know, lent out at the moment. But everybody in Kyoto is waiting, so they know where the real capital is, right? Yeah.

#Aya Ikegame

We don't have this inferiority complex. We are the capital. At least, we are like a cultural, historical capital.

#Pascal

So it's just, I smile so much because this first legislation seems to be catering just purely to this kind of Japan-internal silly rivalry or whatnot, and of course, rent-seeking. But so that's the first one. And then we have two more unnecessary legislations.

#Aya Ikegame

Two more unnecessary ones. And the second one is this protection of the national flag. So if you harm the national flag, that's now a criminal offense.

#Pascal

So burning a Japanese flag on the street is a criminal offense.

#Aya Ikegame

Yeah, or harming or damaging. But we don't know what's considered damaging the national flag.

#Pascal

Hmm.

#Aya Ikegame

And the government will start saying this really, again, silly thing. We have, you know, that okosama lunch, we call it. It's a kid's lunch set. It has kind of like a tomato ketchup sauce rice, and they put a little flag on top. Okay, it's often a national flag. Can you discard it or not?

#Pascal

Yeah. So this is a typical right-wing kind of legislation, which is purely there in order to cater to the nationalists among their constituency.

#Aya Ikegame

Absolutely.

#Pascal

So it's also performative. And then the third one... performative.

#Aya Ikegame

The third one is the most controversial one, and I've been talking about it for many days, and many other major newspapers as well. This is about imperial house rules. They started saying that we don't have many royal family, imperial family members, and most of them are female. And according to our constitution, only male heirs can move to the throne, can succeed to the throne. So, in order to increase the number of people, well, royal family members in the succession, that was the kind of reason that we need to change these imperial house rules. And we all thought the easiest thing is to allow women to become an emperor or empress. And we all love current Princess Aiko. She's like, everybody thinks she's like a gem.

#Pascal

Yeah. And she's the only daughter.

#Aya Ikegame

Only daughter of the current emperor.

#Pascal

Only child of the current emperor. So she should be next in line if females were allowed to become empress. But they're not.

#Aya Ikegame

Yes. And the new change the Takaichi government pushed through the parliament made sure that she's not going to be in line. So what they instead proposed is to bring some boys or uncles, I don't know, some men.

#Pascal

Distant relatives?

#Aya Ikegame

Very distant relatives. Very, very distant relatives from branch families or branch clans, which were separated about 650 years ago. And they claim they all passed through the male line. So they really, really don't want to have anybody very, I mean, kinship-wise, very close to the current emperor. But if they're related through female lines, there's no value.

#Pascal

The fascinating thing is that Sanae Takaichi is Japan's first female prime minister. And the first female prime minister made sure that there will never, ever, ever be a female emperor. So this is just one of the things that kind of makes you wonder what the hell is happening. But she defended that, right? She defended that very hard.

#Aya Ikegame

Yes, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. It's just incredible. And the other thing is that when we talk about adoption, so this is basically, it made it possible to adopt somebody from these remote relatives, you know, like 650 years ago, and those who lived as commoners for many decades, to bring and to be adopted to one of the—there are now four related kind of royal families, these four clans. So they can adopt, but not the emperor's family. So when you hear about adoption, your obvious thing is, okay, the current emperor can adopt some boy from the relatives. That still makes a bit of sense. But it's not. He's not allowed to. His younger brother is not allowed to. But the other four families can adopt because they are only girls. And this adopted son can marry anybody and have a son. Then this son can become the future emperor.

#Pascal

So is there, I mean, this is so bizarre that I just wonder if there's still this infighting among one of these agencies that we don't know a lot about. And, you know, there is the so-called Imperial Household Agency. Yes. And it's rather large. It has a lot of money because it also holds a lot of land and whatnot. And we don't—actually, it's a black box. We don't really know what's going on. They're the people who manage the emperor. And it would make a lot of sense to me that there's factionalism inside, politically, within this agency, and that this is now one of the moments when this factionalism bubbles up to the political level because they need a change in the legislation. Is that what's going on? Again, this is utterly unnecessary.

#Aya Ikegame

It is utterly unnecessary, but the most controversial thing is, you're right, you would imagine the Imperial Household Agency might have a say over it, but not... The emperor himself doesn't have any say over it because he can't really comment on this issue, although it relates to his own family, but he's not allowed to. That's another shocking thing. And, of course, he expressed in a very, very kind of abstract way that he hopes that this new change would gain the understanding of the people, almost implying that this won't be popular. And he knows this is not popular. So anyway, he expressed his opinion, but then, you know, they, Takaichi and everybody, ignored it. But the most controversial thing is these four families who could adopt this boy somewhere. Two of them are Aso's relatives, Mr. Aso.

#Pascal

The former finance minister.

#Aya Ikegame

Former finance minister, and he was briefly prime minister once. He has such power within LDP. He's basically a kingmaker. He made Takaichi prime minister, so Takaichi cannot go against his wish. And this is his really deep wish. So his younger sister married one of the imperial family members, and he died. When he died, and they had only two daughters, what they did was make the daughter the head of the house, which is unprecedented. And while she can become this head of Mikasa no Miya clan, why can't Aiko, Princess Aiko, become imperial household? There's no logic to it. But anyway, he made it possible without any discussion with the people. So currently, his younger sister and his niece have these two royal households, and they can adopt somebody.

#Pascal

Taro Aso, you smart fox. So you're not just the political kingmaker, you're also going to become the literal emperor-maker. This is like, you know, again, consolidation of power, official and unofficial, within the hands of this one clan, the Asos. What is their official name, the...

#Aya Ikegame

Aso Taro?

#Pascal

Aso Taro, but his sister, they are... Yeah, it's Mikasa no Miya.

#Aya Ikegame

Mikasa no Miya, yeah.

#Pascal

Mikasa no Miya, okay. So the Mikasa no Miya are currently consolidating power. And, you know, for everybody, you know, Taro Aso is also the grandson of Yoshida, right?

#Aya Ikegame

Yes, yes. Through the female line, you know. Through the female line, so...

#Pascal

So de facto, you know, the female line is actually quite important, and all of them know it. But they do try to keep it separate in order to do their kind of dirty political family clan games.

#Aya Ikegame

Absolutely. That's what we imagine. And the reason—well, this is just speculation—but the reason we think that this kind of right-wing, not even right-wing, it's more like a far-right section of LDP wants to deny this current line from the Showa Emperor and the Heisei and Reiwa emperors is that they were so close to the idea of a peaceful constitution, and spiritually, Heisei and the current one. And what the Heisei Emperor did was that he probably thought through what is the meaning of the emperor in post-Second World War Japan and the peaceful constitution, what constitutional monarchy should look like. So what he did was go through all the former battlefields of the Second World War, some remote islands in the Southern Pacific, Western Pacific, went there and acknowledged the awful war and also acknowledged all the deaths of all sides, you know, not only Japan, but the United States and others, and prayed for peace. So he can't do anything. He can't apologize. But he did pray.

#Pascal

And this is something that is often misunderstood abroad, when people think that the emperor is like the symbol of pure Japanese militarist nationalism. This might have been the case in the past, but not for the last two.

#Aya Ikegame

So the Showa Emperor, so the grandfather of the current Emperor... Showa is... Well, he was...

#Pascal

He was the emperor during the war, right? He was the guy who got almost hung by MacArthur, but then lived on. And then his son, we know his son is basically a social democrat at heart, the one who

abdicated. And the current one is also—his heart beats on the left side, let's put it this way, not on the right side. And this is something that the Aso types, the right-wing nationalists, they would like to see a change there. However, I must also say, the emperor is not free to speak his mind, right? And he never does. For the last eight years, they never spoke their minds.

#Aya Ikegame

No, no. So the current one is basically—he's really following in his father's footsteps. So, for example, therefore, like Aso and Takaichi, they really don't want him to speak or give even an official speech. You know, they call it honorable words of the emperor. So a few months ago, there was a ceremony celebrating 100 years of the Showa era. And the emperor and empress were invited. They were obviously chief guests. And normally, on such an occasion, he would give a speech, an official speech. This time he wasn't allowed to speak. This is unprecedented.

#Pascal

No, but people must understand: under the Japanese constitution, nobody, nobody is forced to do any kind of labor except for one man. The Japanese emperor must perform his duties. And in order to resign, he needs a change of legislation. And when the last emperor wanted to resign, he needed a change of legislation. And actually, what parliament made sure is that they changed the legislation only for him, because not every emperor can be allowed to resign whenever they want. So even the current emperor is locked into his job in a very, very, very tight corset. The only slave of Japan wears the mantle.

#Aya Ikegame

Yeah, they don't have any human rights, we would say. Of course, they can't vote. But they're not even allowed to have personal property. You know, like the British monarchy has huge assets, and, you know, they can spend money pretty much as they like. Of course, how they look to the public does matter, so they don't really splash the money like crazy. But still, they have so much money. And I remember Queen Elizabeth gave something like one or two million pounds just to organize a birthday party of one of her granddaughters or something. That sort of money the royal family of the UK has, but not in Japan. They are living a very, very modest life.

#Pascal

Yeah, in an olden age.

#Aya Ikegame

And they were not allowed to. Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Absolutely.

#Pascal

No, it's quite fascinating, you know, because that goes even further back. I mean, ever since the Tokugawas took over 350, almost 400 years ago, the emperor basically just became a parked asset. And he still is a parked asset.

#Aya Ikegame

Yes, yes, yes, absolutely. But at the same time, people love the current emperor and empress. And we all know the current empress, Masako, how she suffered when she got married into this imperial family. And she was such a super clever person. You know, she went to Todai, she went to Oxford and Cambridge, and she speaks God knows how many languages, and she's beautiful. And she was a top diplomat. She was going to be a very, very important person in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. But then, you know, the current emperor, when he was a crown prince, she was the one. So he convinced her to marry him, and she did. But after that, she suffered simply because she couldn't have a boy. That's really...

#Pascal

Yeah, yeah, she was criticized a lot, and she had depression and whatnot. Absolutely. And she's kind of, uh, publicly, it's allowed for her to bash her, right? You do not criticize the emperor or the imperial family, but somehow a commoner who married from the outside, she was being bashed for many, many years.

#Aya Ikegame

They tend to, they tend to, although actually royal family members, imperial family members are also criticized. So it's, um, yeah. But her case was terrible. Yeah, and that was within the imperial household. They really didn't want her to, for example, visit foreign countries. You know, oh no, no, you haven't had your boy yet, so you stay at home, try to make a boy, make a boy.

#Pascal

Okay, so what this tells us is that the imperial household and the system of the patriarchal emperor will continue, but the hands behind the political establishment are currently trying to change to a more ideologically aligned kind of personality, which is also kind of—they're playing the long game. I mean, this is a game of generations, right, that they're playing, but they're working on it. So what does this tell us about the current political process? Because one of the worries was, of course, that the government would immediately try to go and change Japan's peace constitution, which actually prescribes in Article 9 that Japan renounces war and will not maintain regular armed forces, which

they already do, but they're called self-defense forces. So a lot of the right-wingers, they want to change that forever and say, like, Japan must be a normal country, must have a normal army. Where are we on that discussion?

#Aya Ikegame

Yeah, so we assume that why Takaichi and Aso, or this very right side of the LDP, seem not to like the current emperor or previous emperor in that matter is because they spread all these peaceful messages and also express their regret of what happened during the war, especially in Asia and the Asia-Pacific region, and China. So they don't want that. So we don't know what's going to happen, but they could bring somebody very sympathetic to right-wing politics to become maybe not next, but next-next emperor. And then they can change the peaceful constitution, peace constitution. So at least...

#Pascal

I mean, this would be huge, right? One of the things, one of the roadblocks for changing the peace constitution is that you would need a public referendum for that in order to change the constitution, at least according to current wisdom. They're trying to attack that one as well, but current wisdom holds, no, actually, the constitution says you need a public referendum. If you ever had an emperor who says, "We need to change this," well, it would immediately sway, like, huge swaths of the population.

#Aya Ikegame

I don't—he's not supposed to say this.

#Pascal

He's not supposed to say that, no.

#Aya Ikegame

Yeah, but we don't know.

#Pascal

We don't know.

#Aya Ikegame

But they really opened Pandora's box by doing this. And especially this imperial house rule change was so unpopular and so criticized. Even Yomiuri Shimbun, which is, you know, almost like a

mouthpiece of the LDP. It's a very, very right... I can't read Yomiuri Shimbun, you know, just, you know, I don't know the equivalent, but... It's a very right-wing newspaper.

#Pascal

Yeah, imagine, like, the Republicans were running the New York Times. Lindsey Graham, the late Lindsey Graham, was running the New York Times. That's what the Yomiuri is in Japan.

#Aya Ikegame

Yeah, exactly. It's very much, you know, very right of center. But they criticized it in a big way. And they even did some sort of survey just to find out how many people want to change this imperial household rule again to make it possible to have a female emperor. And 85% of people said yes.

#Pascal

Oh, wow.

#Aya Ikegame

That's huge. And so Yomiuri Shimbun didn't like it. And then Nikkei, that's again a mouthpiece of almost LDP and, you know, business people, very much right-wing center, go against it. Only Sankei Shimbun—Sankei is like ultra-right, ultra-right, Fox News—only Sankei Shimbun supported it.

#Pascal

Well, it's fascinating because that means it's also interesting, because this Aso clan and these family clans, they sit so high up on thrones that they can actually do that. They can play these kind of games because of the entire machinery that's below them. Yes. But what I mean, it means also that, of course, Takaichi, I cannot imagine her to have been very happy to do that because, A, she's a woman herself. B, you know, she... I just... yes, she's basically—she sits where she sits because of Mr. Aso and because of that support. However, wouldn't you want to do other kind of policies? Because these were not the policies that she talked about when she was running for office. So does this also tell us something about the prime minister? You can be super powerful on paper, but behind the scenes, you still depend on the kingpins in the party.

#Aya Ikegame

Sure, sure, sure. She's particularly in a vulnerable position. But I'm not sure she has a self. She's a politician, I don't know. She doesn't believe in anything, I think. She doesn't have her own ideology of what she wants to achieve. She wants to be popular and she wants to be in power. But apart from that...

#Pascal

I don't know. It's funny because the one thing that she's most famous for right now is that she constantly, constantly repeats how much she works and that she only sleeps two or three hours a night. But that's what she's proud of. That's what she conveys. Yes.

#Aya Ikegame

Yes, I think there's a lot of theory about that. One is that she thinks that, you know, it'll raise her popularity again. Many people feel sympathetic to her because it's just a simple lie. She says, normally I sleep zero to three hours. How can one survive?

#Pascal

Nobody can run like that.

#Aya Ikegame

No, no, nobody. And also, another thing is possibly she's imitating Mrs. Thatcher.

#Pascal

I know.

#Aya Ikegame

She admired Mrs. Thatcher. And Thatcher was famously, you know, cooking things for her staff or something. You know, although she's a prime minister, she's a good housewife as well kind of image. So maybe she tried to do that. We don't know. But it didn't work. Many people find it, you know, appalling, actually. Weird. Yeah, just weird.

#Pascal

What about her foreign policy? I mean, she had this huge gaffe moment, I would say, before she dissolved parliament. And when she was still there with weaker parliamentary support, about two or three weeks before, she said this horrible thing in parliament in reply to a question by the opposition: that, yes, if Taiwan—if the Chinese navy attacked Taiwan—then it would constitute a national emergency in Japan, and she would be able to use the JSDF, the Japanese Self-Defense Forces, for that. And this made China so angry that the reaction surprised even me. And my Chinese friends had to explain to me just how deep she just struck at something that China really, really, really hates. What about that? How did that develop?

#Aya Ikegame

That was very typical of Takaichi behavior. She didn't stick to the script. She just—maybe because of—because she comes from Abe or what, I don't know. You're not supposed to say anything about Taiwan, you know, although her predecessors never did. Never did. Even Abe didn't. So, and she didn't probably realize how serious that would be.

#Pascal

Yeah. So this was, I mean, my interpretation too, is this is a gaffe. She misstepped, and probably she regrets it. But of course, she couldn't say it. Once it's out, it's out. You cannot take it back. Yeah.

#Aya Ikegame

Yeah.

#Pascal

So, but on the other hand, in my perception, she didn't say anything about it again. So she's now quiet on it. Is that about right?

#Aya Ikegame

Yes. I think she was told off. She was told off by Trump himself. She received a phone call, and she was told off because even for Trump, that's something he wouldn't touch.

#Pascal

Yeah, and internally, you know, the one thing is, talking to Chinese colleagues, they interpret this very, very harshly, and they interpret it as a sign that Japan still harbors hate toward China and actually wants to rearm in order to fight China. I keep telling them that's not really what they want. This is Japan at the moment. There's no desire, I would say, to anything like war with China. But how do you interpret where the LDP stands toward its foreign policy? Because there is militarism and there is an increase of government budget for defense. So how do you interpret what's currently going on?

#Aya Ikegame

Well, LDP is not a coherent political party, right? LDP has its own, you know, different factions. It's basically many factions. It's just a platform. So, of course, some have this idea that we have to have a rearm— And, for example, previous Prime Minister Ishiba. Ishiba is quite, you know, centrist, and he's quite liberal, but I think he still thinks that we should have the army, but that's as a

deterrent, not to invade somebody or to attack anybody, but to become more independent from the United States. Yeah, that's his position, I think. And of course, much right of the center has a different agenda.

And another thing is that Takaichi, you know, the really far-right section of LDP, basically wants to please their supporters. They just want to hear that we can fight against China, which is ridiculous, which is really unrealistic and just ridiculous. We can't, and we shouldn't. And economically, we, Japan and China, are so interdependent, you know, we can't survive without China. China cannot survive without Japan. Fighting is just self-destruction.

#Pascal

On my channel, a couple of people will now say, like, "No, no, that's not true. Japan cannot survive without China, but China can do without Japan." Where are the places of proper interdependence? No, just tell us, like, you know, the import-export interdependence. Which sectors are you thinking about?

#Aya Ikegame

All the sectors, but particularly rare earths, rare minerals. We're depending on China. Well, the world is depending on China, right? And Takaichi sent some sort of expedition, and they dig deep in the ocean somewhere, and they say, "Oh, we found some rare mineral there." But how do you refine all this mud from the deep ocean? Well, first of all, digging deep in the ocean is economically not, you know, it's not viable, and also environmentally very damaging. And then we have to refine it. That's, again, environmentally extremely damaging. So we will rely on China, who can do sort of probably, you know, environmentally and human rights-wise.

It's a very, very dodgy thing they do. And we will all rely on that. So that's one thing. And another thing is that the investment of Japanese companies—although some of the manufacturing companies, because labor costs in China are going up, are actually moving from China to Vietnam, and Vietnam to Cambodia, Cambodia to Myanmar, maybe now Bangladesh, you know, India—some of them are retracting. But still, as a market, China is still the largest market next to us, very close to us. And yeah, China may survive without Japan, but again, I'm not sure if they rely on Japanese investment as well.

#Pascal

I mean, it's definitely clear that it's beneficial for both countries to have a good relationship with each other, or at least a passable one. And I mean, we at Kyoto University, we have a lot of brilliant Chinese students, right? There's actually a lot. And one of the things that gives me hope is that I didn't see a reduction of these students. I mean, young, brilliant Chinese people still come to Kyoto and to Japan in order to study and so on. And I think our universities and so on are very happy with

that because it's a growth market, right? Whereas the Japanese market of students is a declining market.

#Aya Ikegame

Absolutely. Absolutely. Yeah, but then, you know, some right-wingers and those who don't really know what's going on, they just feel uncomfortable with this rise of China. You know, some generations and even younger generations want to regard China as a second-class country, you know, and Japan as the number one country in Asia, which is no more. But they still want to believe that. And so...

#Pascal

It's silly. I mean, if anything, they could be wonderful siblings, the two. It's like, you know, if ever you go to Shanghai—I went there recently—it's like Shanghai took so much inspiration also from city building of Tokyo and so on, and vice versa. I mean, they obviously inspire each other, right? So it's a silly thing.

#Aya Ikegame

That's for centuries. We received everything from China.

#Pascal

All of the characters, right?

#Aya Ikegame

All of the characters. Yes, Buddhism, you know, everything. So it is very silly to have this. But Takahichi can use this kind of our inferiority, or kind of uncertainty of, you know, Japan is going down and the population decline. Economy is in stagnation for the past 30 years. And obviously, Chinese economy during that time just goes up and up and up. And the Chinese tourists come and, you know, buy up Japan. And people don't want to hear that, and they want to block it. But they can't.

#Pascal

Yeah, but again, it's a silly thing to do. I mean, now that you have a lot of... Especially now, the Japanese yen is decreasing in value. The Chinese yuan is increasing. It's becoming cheaper for Chinese tourists to come here, and that's actually something very good for Japan.

#Aya Ikegame

For the tourism industry. Absolutely. But I'm sure tourist industries are benefiting from Chinese tourists in a big way. But they don't say anything. They just keep quiet about it, because otherwise they will get backlash.

#Pascal

So what is your assessment, though, of the security policy of Japan, again, with increased spending on weaponry and also indigenous production of missiles and whatnot? I keep telling, when I talk to foreign colleagues, that, you know, China... In my feeling, Japan feels less threatened by China than it feels threatened by North Korea. I think North Korea actually scares the hell out of Japan because of the rhetoric and the nuclear bombs. I don't think the Japanese have the same kind of fear that China might nuke them. But North Korea, they're really scared of it, right?

#Aya Ikegame

It's interesting that we don't know what North Korea will do, right? That's a kind of scary thing. But somehow media don't push that line that much, because otherwise we can't live in this country. It's too close to this crazy North Korea. He might nuke us and we don't know. But so it's kind of toned down, I think. But nobody really thinks that China would invade Japan. I don't think anybody imagined that. But I just feel some right-wingers, they want to feel stronger and, you know, kind of militarily, and other people should fear Japan or respect it at least. And so that's why they want to have a proper army like other countries, et cetera, et cetera. But actually, the really serious problem is even the defense force—it's practically an army, but we can't call it an army, therefore we call it the defense force—they were struggling to recruit young people.

#Pascal

Yep.

#Aya Ikegame

They can recruit only like 60% of the people we need in the defense force. So this population decline really kills the defense force. No young Japanese want to go.

#Pascal

Which I highly support. Young Japanese, do not go. Do not throw yourself into a uniform. Stay away from the uniform. Absolutely not. This is kind of fascinating. On the one hand, Japan would love to have—the right-wingers, the right-wingers would love to have—a big and normal army. On the other hand, the population rejects that. On the one hand, maybe one more thing, Takaichi is also talking about the three—Japan famously has the three nuclear no's, right? No production, no transfer, and no stationing. And she's kind of, she's screwing on those three as well. Where are we on that front?

#Aya Ikegame

We don't know yet, because she was talking about it, but recently she's been very quiet about it. So we don't really know.

#Pascal

This is another one that's very unpopular. I mean, I would say one thing is that a large part of the population doesn't like any nuclear topic, like even nuclear power they don't like.

#Aya Ikegame

Yes, yes. But the government might do it secretly. I don't know. So that's not really—we are having open discussion about it at all.

#Pascal

Right. And the next elections are actually still quite far away, right? What's the next big thing on the calendar?

#Aya Ikegame

Um, currently, no. But again, LDP has its own, you know, I don't know, recycling and reviving itself. So they might get rid of her because her economic policy is not popular amongst business, big business. So they—because she doesn't know anything about the economy—she might really mess up with, for example, this reduction of consumer tax on food. And without talking about the resources, just lower the tax, that would be like another Truss shock which happened in Britain. So Japanese—you know, the Japanese yen goes even further. At that time, she has to go. So we don't have an election, but they might replace the prime minister.

#Pascal

Right, right, right. Yeah, yeah. I mean, the thing is, the Japanese system internally, there's ways of getting rid of a prime minister. I mean, through parliamentary process, there's nothing shady about it. Yeah. And there's one more guy who's kind of in the waiting. And I will bet that he will be prime minister within the next 15 years. Mr. Koizumi, the son of the former Prime Minister Koizumi. What do you think about him? Where is he at the moment? He's still Minister of Defense. Which ministry is he heading right now?

#Aya Ikegame

He's Minister of Defense, yes. He's taking a lot of pretty pictures because the earthquake happened in Kumamoto. So he's ordering, you know, wearing nice shoes and all that. Yeah, maybe he feels that he's a film actor of some sort. Unfortunately, everybody knows he doesn't have that intelligence or ability to be prime minister.

#Pascal

Then again, those are not requirements in order to become prime minister. No. What you need is the Asos to help you.

#Aya Ikegame

Exactly. But he's lucky. He is getting old, so he may not last for long.

#Pascal

Mr. Taro, Taro Aso is now.

#Aya Ikegame

Taro Aso, yeah.

#Pascal

Koizumi is still there. He needs something.

#Aya Ikegame

Koizumi is very young. Another thing is, the LDP, although they had this landslide victory last December, they were losing local elections. That's very interesting. So this might be the beginning of the end of the LDP. If the opposition can put themselves together, the LDP might go.

#Pascal

LDP might go. Then again, we on the left, we keep hoping for this to happen, and then the LDP comes back like a zombie every time, like every single time. And just one more question, because, like, you know, one of the crazy things that happened in December, to me, like, was the left-wing party, you know, that used to be the Democratic Party of Japan. Then it transformed and broke apart, and it became the Constitutional Party of Japan.

#Aya Ikegame

And then...

#Pascal

And then they decided to do, like, full-blown harakiri by teaming up with the Komeito, which just came out of the coalition with the LDP and said, like, together, maybe we can do something. And then they completely, utterly imploded, predictably, because you're basically teaming up with a former team member of the enemy. And everybody was weirded out. What was that? And where are they today? Where's the left opposition today? Yeah.

#Aya Ikegame

It's just too sad to talk about, because I myself thought that was a clever move.

#Pascal

Oh, really?

#Aya Ikegame

Because Komeito, it's basically the devotees of a particular religious party. It's kind of a Buddhist organization. But they were pro-poor, and they have a very strong grassroots network.

#Pascal

True, true. And they are also anti-war, anti-war pro-poor people.

#Aya Ikegame

Yeah, because they are all originally poor people. And so they were supporting LDP, basically. All this vote gathering was done by Komeito members or Soka Gakkai members in their constituencies. So they can mobilize, it was said, about 100,000 votes in each constituency. So it's a big thing. And so if LDP lose this 100,000 and those 100,000 votes move to the left or liberal party, Constitutional Democrats, then they might win. That's the calculation that needs to happen. It didn't happen partly because Takaichi, they spent a huge amount of money creating short videos on YouTube and TikTok and everywhere, basically damaging these Constitutional Democrat Party leaders. They were arrogant. They were rude. They were incompetent. All sorts of videos. This is completely illegal. But they made hundreds of them. And every day they just pushed it. So somehow that worked, it seems.

#Pascal

Okay. So the LDP actually, surprisingly, won the propaganda war on social media, actually.

#Aya Ikegame

I think so.

#Pascal

Yes.

#Aya Ikegame

Yes. And the people were too naive to believe that.

#Pascal

And now where is the party, the left? They are basically, I mean, they've disappeared from public perception.

#Aya Ikegame

Yeah, unfortunately. Although the Communist Party is gaining popularity again. We're very small, but still. The funny thing was that that's such a tricky, I mean, twisted world we are living in. In the parliament, only the Communist Party defended the emperor. The Communist Party is questioning this new change and almost defending the current imperial family. What kind of world are we living in?

#Pascal

We're actually living in one where you can tell apart, you know, the people who have a proper ideology and they believe in fundamentals, and those who just go for the power. And the Komeito—sorry, not the Komeito—the Communist Party actually has fundamentals. They're basically the only party that keeps shouting their fundamentals, and they stick to them. And even though they're tiny, they stick to their guns. And so the emperor thing was one of the points that they wanted to stick to. Yes.

#Aya Ikegame

Yes, they think according to the Constitution, we can have a female emperor because the Constitution says men and women are equal. Why not the emperor? So it's interesting.

#Pascal

It is interesting. Okay, Aya, this was a fascinating overview. Thank you so much for sharing all that knowledge with us. My pleasure. Would people want to read more from you or see more from you? Where should they go to follow you?

#Aya Ikegame

Okay, I have a university website, and also I have my own website. And now I can't remember the address. But if you can just put Aya Ikegame, probably it will come up.

#Pascal

Okay, and I will make sure to Google it, find it, and put the link into the description box below. And we will have you again soon in the future. Aya, thank you so much for your time today. Thank you very much.

#Aya Ikegame

Lovely talking to you.