

## YUKIO OKAMOTO

President, Okamoto Associates, Inc.; Former Special Advisor to two Prime Ministers of Japan

### Ali ASLAN

I am very happy that this panel is not just composed of Europeans, so not a therapeutic or self-referential session if you will, but also emphasises the look from abroad on Europe, and that is why I am delighted to have the President of Okamoto Associates. He is also a former special advisor to two Japanese Prime Ministers and a former career diplomat. One of his posts also took him as ambassador to Paris, so he knows Europe very well.

You heard many Europeans and non-Europeans talk about the current situation. I hope it did not depress you too much, but we are very eager, of course, to hear from one of the leading nations in Asia in terms of how Europe is being perceived over there. Is it still a force to be reckoned with? Is it still an element that can play a vital role in international affairs? I am very curious to hear the perspective from Japan.

### Yukio OKAMOTO

Thank you for including the dimension of the Japan-EU relationship in this panel. My depression does not come from this discussion but from the way we look at the future of the world. From the Japanese point of view, at least for many Japanese people, the future of the world looks bleak; it is gloomy, sometimes even oppressive, with three dictators who are going to influence world affairs for a long time. I believe that Mr. Putin and Mr. Xi Jinping will change their internal rules in order to be able to remain even after their expected terms. Mr. Putin will of course win next year's election by landslide, but I do not think he will step down in 2024. He may change the rules in order to stay until 2030, because he will be only 71 in 2024. Mr. Xi Jinping has already made clear by not including the next generation hopefuls in the Politburo Standing Committee, that he will not be bound by the internal Party rule of stepping down after 10 years, so he will be there from the Party's 20<sup>th</sup> convention in 2022 until the 21<sup>st</sup> convention in 2027. Mr. Kim Jong-un, unless he is eliminated, will be there for 30 or 40 years.

Japan has territorial disputes with all these countries, and we feel that even the world order which we endeavoured so hard to build in the 20<sup>th</sup> century based on common universal values may erode. Looking at the US, we now have quite a unique president – he may be a good president for Japan, but I do not know if he will be a good president for the world. It remains to be seen, but the past record is not very encouraging, given his inaugural speech and his UN General Assembly speech in September, where he essentially said that the US would only mind its own business, and other countries should do the same; the US would be the shining example.

Who will uphold the public good? I have been campaigning everywhere in Japan to the effect that Japan should now be one of the banner-bearers in support of the public good, departing from the diplomacy of rhetoric. Who in the world can we partner with? There is only the EU. The EU is the best partner for Japan in this new campaign. First of all, Europe shares a common destiny with Asia in terms of security. Should Mr. Kim Jong-un's missiles go westward, it will affect the whole of Europe. We are a unity, and we do not have to wait for the ambitious one-world concept of China.

We have so many complementarities from the economic perspective – we both lack natural resources and their efficient use is incumbent on both Japan and Europe. There are a lot of other complementarities which I will leave to smart students of international relations. Anyone can tell you that.

I will say something that other people will never say. That is, it will benefit Japan greatly to partner with the EU. However, has Japan really reconciled with Europe? We have not been able to settle the issue of POW with the UK nor the Netherlands, and we have not created a new era with Germany. There was some interesting research done by the BBC two years ago, where Japanese and German people were asked whether they liked the respective countries.



Japanese love Germans – they consider Germany to be their global partner. We fought the war together. Close to half the population have mainly positive views of Germany, compared to only 3% who had a negative view.

The same public opinion poll in Germany gave diametrically opposite results, with only 20% or so of Germans saying that they had a mainly positive view of Japan. However, 46% had a mainly negative view of Japan. My conjecture is that many Germans still think that Japan is the partner of the Nazis who brought Germany to destruction, and that Japan has a partial responsibility for that. We have to really make our current set of values clear to the German people, but the blame should also fall on us. Have we squarely faced our past, or have we not yet come to a reconciliation with other Asian nations?

We have our own positions, of course, and we have been apologising over and over again to other Asian countries. The war reparations from the late 1950s to the 1960s amounted to almost 30% of our national budget, but no matter what we do, we are not really being forgiven, especially by China and Korea. I teach at a university, and my students ask me how long we should keep apologising. I understand them, I am sympathetic to them, because it is not even about the deeds of their grandfathers, but the deeds of their great-grandfathers, or sometimes great-great-grandfathers, but they have to live with the shackles of past sin for many years.

Looking at Europe, the level of reconciliation you have reached is very impressive, and it is incumbent on Japan to reform our educational system. There is nothing wrong with our textbooks; I read over 20 textbooks taught in high schools, and they were fair, but they are not taught to students in an obligatory manner, but we have to convey the faithful reconstruction and resolution to future generations.

What we will learn in dealing with Europe, especially the EU, will help us to acquire a new dimension in terms of how we can transcend the past, come to grips with the past, and through the collective wisdom approach a final reconciliation in Asia. That is how this reconciliation will benefit us.

#### **Ali ASLAN**

Thanks to Yukio Okamoto, saying that Europe is and remains a vital pillar for relationships, not just in political but also security terms, and also looking at the reconciliation process that still needs to be furthered between Japan and the European continent.