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As part of the *Café Insights* series of interviews with insightful speakers, The Insight Bureau recently caught-up with Robert Ward from the IISS to talk about the more complex and riskier world in which we operate.

[\[Link to audio recording\]](#)



**Andrew Vine** Hello, I'm Andrew Vine and this is Café Insights. I'm the founder and CEO of The Insight Bureau, an agency that represents top-level professional speakers. And today I'm in conversation with Robert Ward. How are you doing?

**Robert Ward** Hello Andrew. Very good, thank you. Good to be in Singapore.

**AV** Terrific. Good to see you again. So, Robert is the Director for Geo-economics and Strategy for the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) based in London. We knew each other when we worked together at the Economist Intelligence Unit.

**RW** We did indeed, and we've worked together frequently since then.

**AV** That's right.

**RW** So, it's always been a pleasure.

**AV** Normally you come into town around June, for the Shangri-La Dialogue, right?

**RW** That's right. June is when the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue hits the road. Always lots of geopolitics and interesting insights from this event, so yes.

**AV** You have also another special role because you are involved in the Japan chair role with IISS. Tell us a little bit more about the breadth of your work and what kind of areas you get involved in.

**RW** So, on the geoeconomics side we look at all sorts of things like trade wars, economic security, Belt and Road Initiative, how China's expanding its influence in all of that. And in Japan we look at Japanese foreign policy, its influence in the Indo-Pacific of course, but also, more recently, its efforts to broaden its influence beyond the region. And these geoeconomics in Japan, they tend to overlap, actually -- they've got some sort of commonality there.

**AV** And so, the work you do, you work with governments, you work with big corporations, helping their thinking about how the world is unfolding, I suppose?

**RW** That's right. We work with governments, businesses all over the world. And just to try to help them to navigate this very, very complicated world that we're in at the moment.

**AV** Yes, well, I was going to say it seems like since the last time we met a year ago -- more than a year ago -- the world has become a much more dangerous place. Obviously, Ukraine, but also some other tensions around the world. So, I was just thinking, how do international

businessmen and women take all this on board when they are thinking about their companies?

- RW** Yes, we met last, I think, in January 2022, so just before Russia's invasion of Ukraine which obviously has transformed many, many things globally, not just in Europe. For business this is a really difficult time to be trying to plan strategy, particularly long-term strategy because you have all that's going on in Europe in terms of the security situation. Russia's war against Ukraine is the biggest war in Europe since the end of the Second World War. So, this is very, very major for Europe. But also, the links between what's going on in Ukraine and Asia. At the 2022 Shangri-La Dialogue, Japan's prime minister Kishida made the link between Ukraine today, could be East Asia tomorrow. So, he made a very explicit link between the two theatres. And I think business really has to start to think globally about risk. You can't silo Asia risk and Europe risk and Middle East risk in the way that you used to have to do. And overlaid on that, of course, is the existing uncertainty from the China-US competition, which just seems to intensify. We just had the balloon incident obviously. So, this is, again, another very difficult thing, I think, for business to navigate.
- AV** With Ukraine I remember you saying that this is kind of going backwards because we thought that big wars between big powers was hopefully something of the past; that we'd have different types of conflict. This is quite concerning because it's very hard to see how the Ukraine conflict can just go away.
- RW** Yes. One of the takeaways from the really horrendous conflict in or against Ukraine is the return of what we're calling 'big war'. The return of state-to-state conflict that we thought had been consigned to history. A lot of countries, China included, will be looking at what's going on in Ukraine for clues about how strategy and tactics are changing. One of the things I think unfortunately to bear in mind, is that this is likely to go on for quite a while. Often interlocutors that I'm dealing with, they're kind of hoping for a full stop on the conflict that will then allow things to get back to what they were. But this is changing so much, geopolitics, in terms of how governments view strategy, in terms of how China is viewing the region as well. So unfortunately, I think that is unlikely. We're in for a bit of a long haul here.
- AV** I know one of the things you look at quite a lot is Taiwan. And this is the thing that people are drawing parallels, and saying, "Well, how does this influence potential outcome for China's ambitions with Taiwan?"
- RW** The IISS are getting a lot of enquiries from business about Taiwan contingency, what would happen if Taiwan was attacked by China. Businesses, MNCs in particular, are obviously worried about the impact this would have, not least on their own sea routes, supply chains, and so on. So, I think the region has become more tense as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. We'll see, if the speaker of the US House of Representatives, McCarthy, goes to Taiwan, how Xi Jinping reacts to that. But tensions are high, and businesses are, quite naturally, getting worried.
- AV** And so new implications for the already quite tense Sino-US relations. And that's going to be quite a tricky thing for companies to manage their own-- especially if they're US companies, but not necessarily just US companies. How do you manage your businesses and your relationships when you manufacture in a country like China? That's going to be quite complex, isn't it?

- RW** Very complex. And one of the ingredients of this complexity is around the unpredictability of economic security legislation and rules that are coming out of the US. Because the US is a superpower, then obviously has the advantage of scale. Other like-minded allies of the US, they clearly have quite a lot of navigation to do as these new rules keep sort of coming out of the US. And that's one of the unpredictabilities I think in terms of the rules of engagement with the US.
- AV** And of course, your special focus on Japan. It's kind of interesting to see what role Japan plays in all of this because sometimes it's being encouraged by the west to take an anti-China stance, but it's not in its interest to do that really, is it?
- RW** One of the misnomers about Japan's late prime minister Abe Shinzo and about current Japanese policy, is that it is anti-China. And that is simply not the case. Japan cannot be anti-China because, like much of Asia, Japan's economy is umbilically linked with that of China. So, it can't be anti-China. What Japan is trying to do is to deter China, to contribute to deterrents with regards to China, to stop it doing things that upset the status quo, to stop coercive activity to upset the status quo. So Japan, within the region, I think has a very important role to play as a sort of middle pole between the two giants, China and the US.
- AV** Fascinating stuff. Well look, Robert, it's great to see you again. Hopefully see you in June when you are here for the Shangri-La Dialogue.
- RW** Absolutely. Thank you.
- AV** Hopefully the world is still in safe hands by then.
- RW** Thank you.

*Robert Ward is Director of Geoeconomics & Strategy, Japan Chair at The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), an organization that is a world-leading authority on global security, political risk and military conflict. Until recently, he was the head of the Economist Intelligence Unit's highly respected editorial team and its most seasoned speaker. Robert has played a leading role in articulating the company's global view to business audiences around the world through a lively and informal speaking style. Able to explain complex issues in an engaging and entertaining way, he is at home with audiences of all sizes and levels of seniority.*

To learn more about Robert Ward's experience and insights, please visit:  
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