

POLICY BRIEF

Japan and Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs)

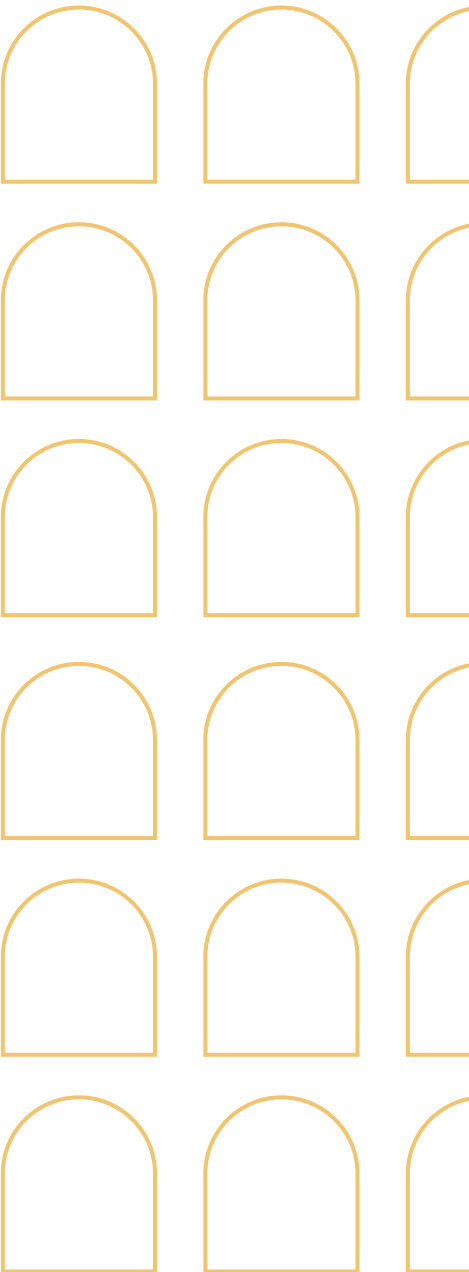
Summary

Japan and the Visegrád-4 (V4) group, i.e. Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, have enjoyed stable and problem-free relations for over 15 years since the official start of the dialogue between Japan and the group. Since 2019, the relationship between the V4 and Japan has also been embedded in the larger framework of the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) and the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA), both of which have made the ties between Japan and the V4 countries more multi-layered and multi-faceted.

However, Japan's engagement with the V4 countries has lacked dynamism and robustness in areas such as Japan's foreign direct investment in the V4 countries and visits by high-ranking Japanese officials to the V4. Arguably, therefore, there has been a structural gap or mismatch between what the V4 countries expect from Japan and what Japan can or is willing to deliver in the V4-Japan relationship.

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This paper¹ problematises the asymmetric relations between Japan and the V4 from the Japanese perspective, focusing mainly on how and why Japan has failed to put more emphasis on fortifying its relationship with the V4 countries. It identifies three background factors behind this mismatch: the US- and China-centric nature of Japan's foreign policy, Japan's large-country focus in its outlook and policies concerning Europe and its rather outdated self-image as an important donor and supporter of the Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs).

Japan's recent active diplomacy towards the V4 countries demonstrates a newly gained eagerness to bring fresh impetus to Japan-V4 relations. While it is obviously a welcome development, Japan needs to have stronger awareness that fortifying its ties with the V4/CEEC countries has its own merits. In other words, Japan should not see the CEECs exclusively as allies in its efforts to compete with the growing influence of China in the region. To improve this situation, it is important for Japan to gain more concrete understanding of the infrastructure needs of the V4 countries and examine how it can substantially contribute to meeting them.

Japan and the V4 countries: a problem-free but asymmetrical relationship?

The official start of the dialogue between Japan and the V4 group dates back to the early 2000s. During a visit by then Prime Minister Koizumi to the Czech Republic and Poland in August 2003 and a visit by the Hungarian prime minister to Japan in October 2004, it was agreed to promote the 'V4+Japan' dialogue and cooperation between Japan and the V4 group. Since then, two rounds of summit meetings, seven rounds of foreign affairs minister meetings and numerous thematic conferences and workshops (covering topics such as migration, cyber security, Brexit, science and technology) have been held between Japan and the V4 group. The consultations and cooperation between the V4 and Japan in various sectors have been described by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA) as "multi-layered diplomacy towards Europe."²

1 The earlier and shorter version of this paper appeared as a working paper at Higashino, Atsuko (2021) "Japan's Relations with Visegrád 4 (V4) and the Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs): Adjusting Mismatches?," *Foreign Policy Review*, 14 (1). pp. 111-123.

2 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, Diplomatic Bluebook 2020, p. 116, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/2020/pdf/2-4.pdf>

The exchanges between the V4 and Japan can to a large extent be assessed positively. According to a report published by the Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS), "the V4+Japan format has become one of the most mature of the V4+ partnerships, encompassing cooperation and consultations on various issues."³ Compared to other 'V4+' formats that started in the 2010s, such as V4+LAC (Latin America and the Caribbean), V4+South Korea, V4+Egypt and V4+African Union, V4+Japan is generally seen as a pioneering partnership, with the longest history and the widest range of cooperation among all the cooperative frameworks that the V4 group has instituted.⁴

For Japan too, V4+Japan is one of the oldest and by far the most successful of its multilateral platforms with European countries. Of course, Japan has extensive experience when it comes to bilateral consultations with European countries and the European Union, but the dialogues with the V4 countries represent its earliest experience of undertaking institutionalised policy consultation with a regional group within the European Union.⁵ After the launch of V4+Japan, Japan and the GUAM countries (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova) inaugurated the GUAM+1 framework in 2007. While the framework held annual ministerial meetings until 2019, the scope of consultation and cooperation was much more limited than that of V4+Japan. Likewise, Japan launched the Western Balkans Cooperation Initiative in 2018 with the aim of supporting socio-economic reforms in the Western Balkan countries that were necessary for their EU accession and facilitating cooperation within the region. Therefore, this initiative is qualitatively different from V4+Japan, as the former puts more emphasis on assistance while the latter stresses cooperation on an equal footing.

However, there are many areas where Japan could and should have sought to fortify relations with the V4 countries more actively. Among others, Japan's investments in the region have always been cautious and have not lived up to the region's expectations. For many years now they have been surpassed by those of South Korea and China. Constant requests from the V4 countries for more Japanese investment in the region have not been sufficient-

3 Klára Dubravčíková *et.al.*, Prospects for Developing the V4+China Cooperation Platform, Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS), 17 October 2019, p. 22.

4 Ibid.

5 Since 2008, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan has also held the 'Japan-Baltic Seminar' with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania on annual bases, but this has rather been a series of expert meetings than policy consultation.

ly satisfied. In addition, the frequency of visits by high-ranking officials such as the Japanese prime minister and other important political leaders to the V4 countries has been low despite requests from the V4. In June 2013, Shinzo Abe became the first Japanese prime minister to visit Poland in ten years after Koizumi's visit in 2003, while the Polish Prime Minister visited Japan once in 2005 (Marek Marian Belka) and the President twice (Lech Aleksander Kaczyński in 2008 and Bronisław Komorowski in 2015). In April 2019 Abe visited Slovakia for the first time as Japanese prime minister, while Japan received one Prime Ministerial visit (Vladimír Mečiar in 1997) and three Presidential visits (Michal Kováč in 1998, Ivan Gasparovic in 2009 and Zuzana Čaputová in 2019) from Slovakia. Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko visited Hungary in July 2002 but no prime minister of Japan has visited Hungary since 2000, while Japan received three Presidential visits (Árpád Göncz in 2000, Sólyom László in 2009 and Áder János in 2019) and two Prime Ministerial visits (Orbán Viktor in 2013 and in 2019). Neither has a Japanese prime minister visited the Czech Republic since Koizumi's visit in 2003, while Japan received three Presidential visits (Václav Havel in 1995, Václav Klaus in 2007 and in 2008) and four Prime Ministerial visits (Václav Klaus in 1996, Jiří Paroubek in 2005, Bohuslav Sobotka in 2017 and Andrej Babiš in 2019). Visits by the heads of the state and ministers of the V4 countries have constantly outnumbered those by their Japanese counterparts, which has inevitably made the relationship between the V4 and Japan asymmetrical.

This is not to say that Japan as a whole has had little interest in the V4/CEECs relationship. On the contrary, in areas such as history, linguistics and cultural studies, the V4 CEECs have attracted significant interest in Japan. Numerous academic studies concerning them have been conducted and the results have been actively published.⁶ Works by outstanding historians and authors from the V4/CEECs, such as Victor Sebestyen⁷ and Ivan Krastev,⁸ and by authors who are well known for their analyses of

the history of the region, such as Anne Applebaum⁹ and Timothy Garton Ash, were translated into Japanese and published shortly after the publication of the original versions. It is therefore all the more regrettable that such established interests in the culture and history of the V4/CEECs have not been adequately translated into a Japanese diplomatic endeavour to fortify relations with the V4/CEECs.

One of the very noticeable negative side effects of Japan's inactive foreign relations vis-à-vis the V4 countries has been its failure to capitalise on some important political and economic developments in the V4/CEECs, in particular the once glowing and now fading influence of China in the region. Even though Japan has recently been vigilant about China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it failed to regard the V4/CEECs as important targets of the BRI, particularly in the '16(17)+1' framework, which is a platform for cooperation between China and the CEE and Western Balkan countries.¹⁰ Learning from the V4's experience of 16(17)+1 could be valuable for Japan, especially in terms of assessing the extent of China's influence in a particular area of Europe and considering how Japan should respond to the challenges posed by the BRI. However, it is only recently that Japan has started to be aware of the significance of the 16(17)+1 for the V4/CEECs.¹¹ Furthermore, this awareness only came when these countries had already started to lose interest in the framework.

The particularity of Japan's view of European affairs

The reasons why Japan failed to notice China's influence in the V4/CEECs effectively highlight the particularity of Japan's view of international and European affairs. At least three such particularities can be identified: (i) the US- and China-centric nature of Japan's foreign policy, (ii) Japan's focus on large countries in its outlook towards Europe, and

6 The Japanese Association for Russian and East European Studies (JAREES), established in 1971 and with 400 members, is a very active academic association with a focus on Slavic and East European studies. See <https://www.jarees.jp/> for more information.

7 Victor Sebestyen, *Twelve Days: The Story of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution*. Pantheon Books, 2006 (ヴィクター・セバスチエン『ハンガリー革命』白水社、2008年)；Victor Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989: The Fall of the Soviet Empire*, Hachette, 2009 (ヴィクター・セバスチエン『東欧革命1989 ソ連帝国の崩壊』白水社、2009年)。

8 Ivan Krastev, *After Europe*, Penn University Press, 2017 (イワン・クラステフ『アフター・ヨーロッパ—ポピュリズムという妖怪にどう向きあうか』岩波書店、2018年)；Ivan Krastev, *The Light that Failed: A Reckoning*, co-authored with Stephen Holmes, Penguin, 2019 (イワン・クラステフ『模倣の罠—自由主義の没落』中央公論新社、2021年)。

9 Anne Applebaum, *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1944–1956*, Allen Lane, 2012 (アン・アプルボーム『鉄のカーテン——東欧の壊滅1944-56(上)(下)』白水社、2019年)；Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*, Doubleday, 2020 (アン・アプルボーム『権威主義の誘惑——民主政治の黄昏』白水社、2021年)。

10 Lithuania declared its withdrawal from the 17+1 in May 2021. As of June 2022, therefore, there are 16 EU member countries in this format. It is reported that the Czech Republic and several other Central and Eastern European countries are considering leaving the 16+1 framework. See "Czech Republic eyes exit from China's 16+1 investment club," Al Jazeera, 8 June 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/6/8/czech-republic-eyes-exit-from-chinas-16-1-investment-club>

11 CiNii (<https://ci.nii.ac.jp/en>), a bibliographical database service for material in Japanese academic libraries, shows that there are very few research papers and academic works on the 16(17)+1 published before 2021. Furthermore, there were essentially no articles on the 16(17)+1 in the main Japanese newspapers until 2019.

(iii) a rather outdated self-image of Japan as an important donor and supporter of the V4/CEECs. These three particularities need to be scrutinised individually in order to identify the ways in which Japan can improve and fortify its relations with the V4/CEECs in a meaningful way.

First, it is widely known that Japan's interest in international affairs has traditionally been dominated by its relationship with the US. In addition, Japan's policy towards China has long been extremely controversial, continually oscillating between pro- and anti-China positions. In addition, the US-China confrontation during the Trump administration from 2017 to 2021 weighed heavily on Japan, with the situation remaining unchanged even after the inauguration of the Biden administration, which has continued to take a hard position towards China. Too often, Japan's foreign policy interest has been too narrowly focused on how Japan should behave amidst the confrontation between these two great powers. While it is more than obvious that Japan needs to prioritise the US-Japan relationship, not least from the alliance viewpoint, its economic interdependence with China is also critical for its economic survival. Since the main point of interest, or worry, has been how and the extent to which the US-China confrontation is relevant to Japan and how to deal with it, Japan's interest in Europe has remained secondary.

Second, even when Japan turns its eyes towards Europe, it usually tends to focus its attention on larger countries, namely the United Kingdom, Germany and France, and to a lesser extent on smaller nations like Italy. Since 2015 in particular, there have been reports in Japan on how large European countries were getting closer to China, as was evident from the (in)famous statement by then UK Prime Minister David Cameron concerning a "golden age of UK-China relations," a slew of announcements by the UK and other European governments regarding their decisions to join the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Italian government's signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with China on the BRI. Among other things, the Merkel administration's apparent pro-China posture received negative coverage in the Japanese media. Merkel visited China 12 times during the 15 years of her time in office but visited Japan only five times.

Currently, Europe's position towards China has hardened considerably over concerns about widespread human rights abuses and crimes against humanity, including the forced labour issue in Xinjiang, suppression of pro-democracy protests in

Hong Kong and the suspected cover-up of information concerning the origin of COVID-19. The freezing of the ratification process of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) in May 2021 is indeed a sign that the honeymoon period is over in the relationship between Europe and China. Even Germany, apparently the most China-friendly European country in the eyes of many Japanese people, is actively seeking a new China strategy in the post-Merkel era.

However, it seems that Japan still retains its after-image of European countries from the mid-2010s, when many European countries actively sought to fortify economic ties with China, and largely regards European countries as being 'too pro-China' or 'too soft on China'.¹² The V4/CEECs, which have been widely described in the Japanese media as sharing a similar enthusiasm with Germany to establish economic ties with China, are also considered to be too pro-China,¹³ even though it is now widely known that many V4/CEEC countries have lost their enthusiasm about maintaining close economic relationships with China.¹⁴

Last but not least, it is important to note the significant paradox arising from Japan's experience in assisting the CEECs immediately after the end of the Cold War in that it has left Japan with a rather outdated self-image of being an important donor and supporter of the CEECs. This obsolete self-image may have hindered Japan's efforts to keep itself updated about the latest developments in the CEECs, in particular their fast-track relationship with China in the 16(17)+1 framework. Indeed, Japan's economic assistance in the time of the Kaifu administration in the early 1990s was noteworthy in its size.¹⁵ In addition, Japan's investments in the V4 countries in the early 1990s, including the successful Magyar Suzuki Zrt venture, were dynamic. In the 2000s, it was stated in the Diplomatic Bluebook by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan that "Japan has provided assistance to the Central and South Eastern European countries for their democratisation and transition to market economies since the end of the Cold War, and has been making efforts to build preferable relations with these countries

12 鶴岡路人「戦略的自律を目指す欧州——試される日本の外交力」『Wedge Report』, 18 January. <https://wedge.ismedia.jp/articles/-/21836>

13 「[社説]日欧連携を地域安定に生かせ」『日本経済新聞』28 May 2021, <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZQODK285140Y1A520C2000000/>

14 Andreea Brînză, "How China's 17+1 Became a Zombie Mechanism," The Diplomat, 10 February 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/how-chinas-171-became-a-zombie-mechanism/>

15 On Japan's assistance to the CEECs, mainly to Hungary and Poland, see the address by then Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu on 9 January 1999. <https://worldjpn.grips.ac.jp/documents/texts/exdpm/19900109.S1J.html>

in expectation of EU enlargement and a deepening of European integration.”¹⁶ This demonstrates the widely shared belief within the diplomatic circle in Japan that besides the US and Europe, Japan was one of the main providers of considerable assistance to the CEECs in the difficult period of their transition. In reality, however, as was argued above, Japanese economic engagement in the region gradually weakened and was surpassed first by South Korea and then by China as early as the mid-2000s. However, the self-image that Japan is one of the most significant supporters of the V4/CEECs has somehow persisted, preventing Japan from improving its knowledge of the latest developments in the region, including the rise and fall of China’s influence in the region.

Towards stronger ties between Japan and the V4 group

The COVID-19 pandemic set alarm bells ringing in Japan, which started to realise the closeness of China and the CEECs. When Europe experienced its first outbreak of COVID-19 in March 2020, the so-called mask diplomacy that China actively engaged in drew strong attention in and outside Europe. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić’s remarks that “European solidarity was a myth” and therefore “Serbia now turns its eyes to China”¹⁷ were widely reported in Japan¹⁸ as the words symbolised the closeness between China and certain parts of Europe. Furthermore, Hungary’s approval of a vaccine made by China’s Sinopharm, the first EU member state to do so, was also widely reported in Japan as an example of China’s successful vaccine diplomacy.¹⁹ Ironically, therefore, it was the outbreak of COVID-19 that arguably promoted awareness in Japan that it was China, not Japan, that the V4/CEECs saw as an important Asian partner in a time of crisis. Gradually, the closeness between China and the V4/CEECs started gaining attention in Japan, and rather belatedly the BRI developments in the V4/CEECs and the 16(17)+1 format started to be reported in detail in Japanese newspapers and on Japanese TV.

16 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Diplomatic Bluebook 2004, p. 98.

17 ‘Serbia turns to China due to ‘lack of EU solidarity’ on coronavirus,’ [euractiv.com](https://www.euractiv.com), 18 March 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/china/news/serbia-turns-to-china-due-to-lack-of-eu-solidarity-on-coronavirus/>

18 「欧州連帯は『おとぎ話』? EUに亀裂、存在感増す中ロ」『朝日新聞』25 April 2020.

19 「ハンガリー、中国製ワクチンを承認 EUで初」『日本経済新聞』30 January 2021.

In this context, the series of visits to the V4/CEECs in 2021 by Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi reflect the change in Japan’s mindset. In May that year he visited Slovenia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, along with Poland for a bilateral and a V4+Japan meeting. In July, he visited Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania after attending the G7 meeting. All these visits were useful in promoting and substantiating the common agendas of Japan and the V4/CEECs.

Japan’s acknowledgement of the importance of the V4/CEECs is undoubtedly a welcome development. However, it is important for Japan not to see its relations with them narrowly in the context of its competition with China. What is vital for Japan is to thoroughly study the current needs of the V4/CEECs, consider what it can do to satisfy these needs and set clear concrete goals to be achieved in cooperation with these countries.

In this context, what Japan and Europe need to do is jointly promote an alternative to the BRI in order to develop more sustainable inclusive environmentally-friendly infrastructure. From this viewpoint, one promising idea is to promote cooperation and coordination between the Japan-led Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) initiative and the Poland-led Three Seas Initiative (TSI). In September 2021, Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Zbigniew Rau contributed an article to the Sankei Shinbun, one of the main Japanese newspapers, in which he argued in favour of close cooperation between the FOIP and the TSI, claiming that “the security and development of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans are inextricably linked, and without stability in one there can be no stability in the other ... FOIP and TSI have synergies.” He also claimed that “Poland and Japan share the belief that only with the necessary economic strength and infrastructure can a comprehensive approach be taken that will provide an effective deterrent and defence against threats. There are countries, including both our partners, that have their sights set on provocations.”²⁰ At the Japan-Poland foreign minister meeting in May 2021, Japan’s Foreign Minister Motegi mentioned that the TSI was “a meaningful endeavour which will promote the Japan-EU Connectivity Partnership and the unity of Europe,” and expressed Japan’s intention “to consider ways in which Japan could become involved.”²¹

20 「脅威抑止に経済連携は不可欠 ポーランドのズビグニェフ・ラウ外相寄稿」『産経新聞』9 September 2021. <https://www.sankei.com/article/20210909-6N2NW3QD-QJLVXPYJOUV4DFCS6U/> Author’s translation.

21 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Japan-Poland Foreign Ministers’ Meeting,” 6 May 2021, https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/c_see/pl/page4e_001129.html

Taking account of the fact that enthusiasm about the TSI varies even within the V4 countries, it is vitally important for Japan to thoroughly study the postures of the other V4 members concerning what could actually be done in terms of FOIP-TSI cooperation, and whether it could lead to revitalisation of the overall relationship between the V4 group and Japan. Nevertheless, this potential FOIP-TSI cooperation could pave the way for Japan to improve its understanding of the V4/CEECs and build a more robust relationship with them.

The ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war has further increased the value of the V4 for Japan. Knowledge of Ukraine in Japan is not sufficient. In this context, Japan is listening more than ever to the claims of the V4/CEECs over the war. More Japanese are beginning to realise that a deeper knowledge of the V4's and CEECs' perceptions of Russia and Ukraine is the key to a more in-depth grasp of the situation regarding this war. An increasing number of Japanese have also begun to look at Polish and Czech support for Ukraine in particular, and to get ideas about what Japan can do to assist Ukraine. The actions of the V4/CEEC countries over the Russian-Ukrainian war have become a source of inspiration for Japan's diplomacy. Japan should seize the opportunity and seek further cooperation with the V4/CEECs.

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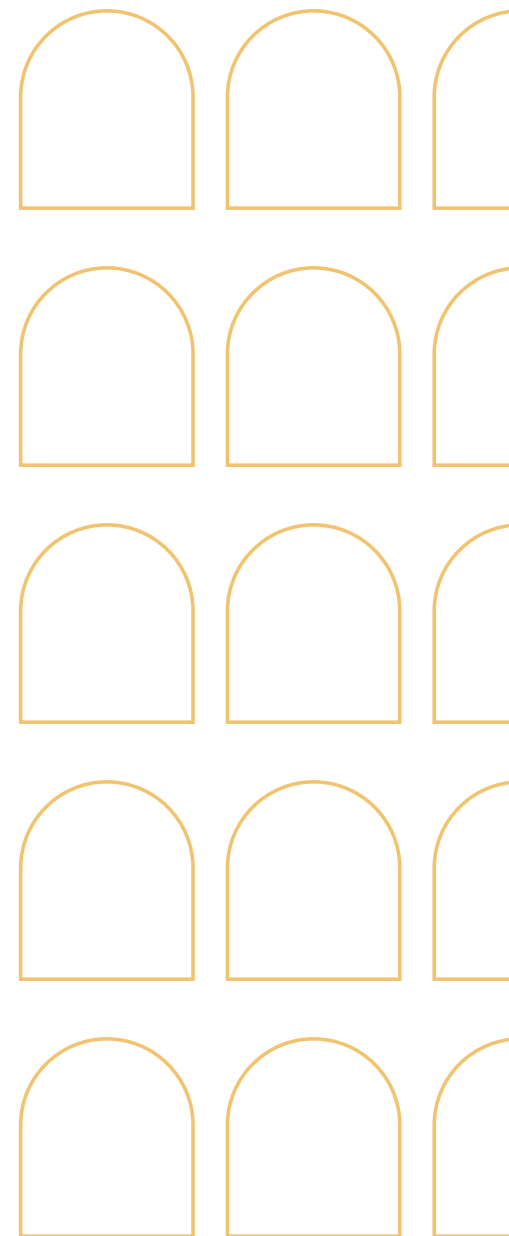
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