

New Japanese Leader Provides Stability for U.S. Alliance

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

As Japan's new prime minister, Fumio Kishida intent to maintain Japan's foreign and security policies will be reassuring to U.S. policymakers and alliance managers.

However, Kishida will need policy successes if he seeks to avoid a return to the revolving door of short-termed prime ministers.

Washington and Tokyo should take steps to strengthen the U.S.-Japan alliance against the growing Chinese and North Korea threats.

Former Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida was elected to lead Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and become its candidate for prime minister in the November general election. He is assured of becoming Japan's next leader given the LDP's strong national majority and weak opposition parties. As Japan's longest-serving foreign minister, Kishida is well known to U.S. policymakers. He will maintain Japan's security and foreign policies, including strong support for the U.S. alliance and the need to address Chinese and North Korean regional security threats.

The LDP and Japan's Political Landscape

Kishida will succeed Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga who declined to run again due to plummeting

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public approval and declining LDP leadership support during his one year in office. Suga was heavily criticized for Japan's slow COVID-19 vaccination response, while Kishida faces an improved situation, with 64 percent of the population now vaccinated.¹ In early September, Suga sought to remain in office by proposing a reshuffling of senior party officers and calling a snap election. Party members firmly rejected both moves, which they feared would further jeopardize LDP chances in the upcoming lower-house election. Facing an untenable situation, Suga bowed out.

Former Minister of Defense Taro Kono was the favorite candidate of the public and younger rank-and-file LDP members but was less favored by party elites. Kono had been predicted to win the first round of balloting, though not expected to gain sufficient votes to win outright. Kishida was then seen as highly likely to win in a second runoff vote, which gives greater weight to LDP members of parliament. Kishida, however, did even better than expected in the first round, beating Kono by one vote. Kono has long been seen as a maverick for upending policies without consulting policy-makers or the bureaucracies, a trait welcomed by the public but not by party leadership. His abrupt decision last year to cancel the major Aegis Ashore missile defense system caught the United States by surprise and left Tokyo scrambling to come up with an alternative.²

Kishida's Policy Positions

Kishida, by contrast, is less dynamic, favors consensus building, and will be far more predictable to U.S. alliance managers. He previously described himself as a "dove" in contrast to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's hawk,³ though always strongly supportive of the bilateral Japan–U.S. alliance. During the campaign, however, Kishida sought to appeal to conservative voters by advocating tougher foreign and security policies.

North Korea. Kishida will maintain Tokyo's firm stance against North Korea's increasing nuclear and missile threats, repeated violations of U.N. resolutions, and will seek progress in resolving Pyongyang's earlier abductions of Japanese citizens.

China. Kishida has expressed concerns about China's growing military strength and its increasing efforts to intimidate nations throughout Asia. He declared that countering China is Japan's "top priority"⁴ and called Taiwan "the front line in the struggle by democracies to resist authoritarianism's advance." Kishida called for maintaining stability in the Taiwan Strait and advocated Tokyo and Washington run joint crisis simulations addressing Taiwan crisis scenarios.⁵

To address regional security challenges, Kishida called for increasing Japan's defense budget beyond its traditional level of 1 percent of gross domestic product and augmenting the country's missile defenses. He also stated that Japan should consider building a missile-strike capability as a "viable option" against China and North Korea to be implemented in response to initial attacks.⁶

Strike Capabilities. Kishida's views on Japan acquiring strike capabilities are also encouraging. Doing so would augment the U.S. military in the Indo-Pacific and encourage other allies to increase their share of the security burden. Washington should urge Japan to develop long-range strike capabilities but incorporate them into the overall alliance structure with combined operational planning. However, Japan and the U.S. will need to work together to overcome numerous constitutional, legal, budgetary, technical, and bureaucratic obstacles.⁷

The Indo-Pacific. Kishida is expected to uphold Shinzo Abe's visionary policies on upholding a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, as well as strengthening of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue amongst Japan, the United States, Australia, and India. He has also pledged to "protect universal democratic values" and addressed Chinese human rights violations in Hong Kong and the Uygur Autonomous Region. Kishida also vowed to establish a special advisor to the prime minister in charge of human rights issues.⁸

South Korea. Kishida may be able to improve Japan's strained relations with South Korea. While foreign minister, he negotiated a 2015 agreement with South Korea that sought to resolve the contentious "comfort women" issue (in which the Japanese military forced South Korean women into sexual slavery during World War II). Tokyo and Seoul both pledged that the agreement was a "final and irreversible" resolution, but it unraveled after Moon Jae-in became South Korean president. In recent years, bilateral ties deteriorated still further over lingering historic and sovereignty disputes, trade restrictions, and threats to withdraw from intelligence-sharing agreements. Seoul may be more willing to move forward on improving relations since Kishida does not harbor former Prime Minister Abe's perceived nationalist views that alienated Japan's neighbors.

Kishida's intent to maintain Japan's foreign and security policies will be reassuring to U.S. policymakers and alliance managers. During his long tenure as prime minister, Shinzo Abe augmented Japan's defenses against China's increasing territorial incursions, overcame stiff domestic resistance to expanding Tokyo's regional and global security role, and enhanced the country's defense capabilities.

Nonetheless, despite these significant accomplishments, the U.S.–Japan Alliance remains insufficient against the Chinese and North Korean threats.

Recommendations for Washington and Tokyo

Washington and Tokyo can do several things to strengthen the U.S.–Japan Alliance against the growing Chinese and North Korean threats.

Japan should:

- **Increase Japan’s defense budget.** Kishida must convince the Japanese legislature and public that steadily rising threats require more than incremental adjustments to the defense budget. Although Tokyo has articulated comprehensive new strategies, missions, and ambitious procurement plans, it has not coupled them with the resources needed for implementation. An escalating threat environment requires a commensurate response by Japan to augment its defense capabilities. Japan must break through and move well above its self-imposed conceptual limit of spending only 1 percent of its GDP on defense—perhaps to the same 2 percent level to which NATO members have committed.
- **Move forward on missile defense.** Canceling Aegis Ashore in favor of two additional Aegis-equipped ships does not provide a comparable level of missile defense. The land-based version would have protected the entire country, been unaffected by weather or staffing shortages of Aegis ships, and freed U.S. and Japanese ships for other missions. Tokyo should review its missile defense plans, in conjunction with Washington, to ensure it possesses robust defenses against North Korea’s increasingly sophisticated missiles.

The U.S. should:

- **Urge Japan to assume additional security responsibilities.** The U.S. should welcome any expansion in the Japanese security role to augment alliance capabilities. However, it should nonetheless move carefully on strike capabilities; Japanese strike capability is still only at the theoretical debate stage. Tokyo has yet to articulate strike policy, strategy, a doctrine of employment, triggering events, procurement, deployment, or how offensive systems would train in Japan. Such decisions should be made in an alliance framework, in part, to allay South Korean concerns that would inevitably arise.

The U.S. and Japan should work together to:

- **Create a trilateral security initiative.** Such a 2+2+2 meeting of the U.S., South Korean, and Japanese foreign and defense ministers should develop joint strategies for addressing common threats and objectives. The allies should develop comprehensive trilateral plans for responding to North Korean provocations and crisis management. Early initiatives could include standardizing logistic cross-servicing, information-sharing protocols, and overseas deployments.
- **Align Allied plans to counter China's A2/AD strategy.** Tokyo is augmenting forces and facilities in its southwest island chain and planning to procure longer-range missiles to extend protective coverage. Japan should closely coordinate its plans with emerging U.S. Army and Marine Corps strategies, which may significantly alter U.S. doctrine, strategy, procurement, and deployment plans in the Indo-Pacific theater. Japanese and U.S. alliance managers should identify complementary roles and missions, not only for defense of Japan but also for a broader regional strategy that includes other countries in southeast Asia.

Conclusion

Having won Japan's Game of Thrones, Fumio Kishida will need policy successes if he seeks to avoid a return to Japan's revolving door of short-term prime ministers. While Suga was heavily criticized for Japan's slow COVID-19 vaccination, Kishida faces an improved situation with 64 percent of the population now vaccinated.⁹ But Kishida will have to show progress in Japan's post-COVID-19 economic recovery.

Kishida will be judged, and his political longevity determined, by how well he handles Japan's security and economic challenges. If he succeeds, he will retain the political and public support necessary to remain in office; if he does not, many political challengers are eager to capitalize on a short tenure.

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Endnotes

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