



# ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXXII / 2021

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## Asia in 2021: In the grip of global and local crises

**Edited by**  
**Michelguglielmo Torri**  
**Filippo Boni**  
**Diego Maiorano**

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CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI "CESARE BONACOSSA" - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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JAPAN 2021: THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY EMERGES STRONGER  
DESPITE DOMESTIC TUMULT

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*The COVID-19 pandemic continued to impact the Japanese economy as well as the political fortunes of Japan's leader in 2021. For the second year in a row, Japan's Prime Minister was forced to stand down, portending a return to the revolving door of one-year prime ministerships that characterized the politically tumultuous period between 2006 and 2012. Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide's announcement that he would not seek reappointment as president of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), therefore effectively resigning as prime minister, precipitated the most competitive race for the LDP leadership in a decade in September. Suga's anointed replacement was former record-setting Minister of Foreign Affairs Kishida Fumio. Kishida was not the most popular choice for Japan's next prime minister among the public or even the LDP party cadres. His initial cabinet ratings reflected this and the fact that Kishida had triumphed over then «vaccine minister» Kōno Tarō in the party contest primarily due to factional manoeuvrings facilitated by former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō. To the traditionally dovish Kishida's credit, he demonstrated great pragmatism in 2021. He managed to win the backing of Abe and other conservatives by adapting his own political positions and adopting others from the conservative wing of the LDP, particularly on Taiwan policy, national security, and economic security policy. Kishida survived Japan's October House of Representatives election in better-than-expected shape and went on to improve his cabinet ratings in the last two months of 2021. Kishida entered 2022 in a strong position with both the COVID-19 and economic situation heading in the right direction ahead of the mid-2022 House of Councillors election—the last national election Kishida will have to face for three years if he prevails.*

KEYWORDS – Kishida Fumio; Japan-Taiwan relations; 2021 general elections; Abe Shinzō; Japan's security policy, economic security.

### 1. Introduction

For the second year in a row, domestic and international politics in Japan were characterized by unexpected political dynamism and change. Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide initially expected he would secure reappointment

as the president of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Japan's ruling party, and remain premier throughout 2021. Suga, however, grew increasingly unpopular, which risked weakening the LDP's grip on power as the term of the 48<sup>th</sup> House of Representatives wound down and a lower house election became imminent. Suga eventually succumbed to internal party pressure to pull out from the LDP presidential elections, allowing the party to face the electorate under a new leadership team.

September's LDP leadership election contained more surprises. Despite the hawkish tenor of the ruling party's leadership contest, the eventual winner was Kishida Fumio, leader of the traditionally dovish Kōchikai faction and a former long-serving minister of Foreign Affairs. The Kōchikai has customarily been concerned with bread-and-butter issues and dialogue with Japan's East Asian neighbours, thus seemingly opening the door for policy discontinuity from the path set by Japan's most influential prime minister in the post-Cold War years, Abe Shinzō. As we will argue, Kishida's emergence, however, does not represent a pivot to a more dovish foreign policy in Japan.

Joseph R. Biden's inauguration as president of the United States at the start of 2021 also made room for new Japanese initiatives in the foreign and security policy realm. The renewed emphasis in Washington DC on international partnerships was translated into new forms of cooperation and coordination between the US and «like-minded partners», first and foremost, Japan. This was reflected in the rebranding of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) as a more institutionalized cooperation mechanism within the Indo-Pacific's region. To build its regional influence, the Quad – rather than concentrating on hard security matters – will now focus more on the provision of global public goods, such as COVID-19 vaccines, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, climate change mitigation, infrastructure investment, and technology cooperation.<sup>1</sup> While in 2021 US-Japan cooperation in the technology and economic security realms went hand-in-hand with a growing emphasis on the acquisition of new military capabilities to restrain China, the year might be remembered as a turning point in Japan's relationship and approach to Taiwan. In fact, Tokyo coordinated with Washington DC to signal its commitment to maintain stable and peaceful Cross-Strait relations.

While these developments in Japan's domestic politics and its international relations throughout 2021 hint at a potential rupture with past practice and policy, this article also identifies significant continuity in both spheres. The re-emergence of Abe as a powerbroker within the LDP was on full display during the party presidential elections and highlighted the need for contenders to secure support from the ruling party's weightiest faction.

1. Susan Thornton, «The Quad (Finally) Delivers: Can it be Sustained?», *Brookings Institute*, 14 April 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/04/14/the-quad-finally-delivers-can-it-be-sustained/>.



2021 ended with 64-year-old moderate Kishida Fumio in charge; nonetheless, the influence of the conservative factions of the LDP imprinted on the Kishida administration the logic of the policy continuity which had started with Abe, had passed through Suga, and manifested itself in the form of a «re-booted» Kishida in 2021.

## 2. Suga's Demise

Entering 2021, Suga Yoshihide knew he had to overcome two political challenges to remain prime minister: the LDP presidency contest and a House of Representatives election. As late as May, Suga had many reasons to be optimistic about the possibility of seeing out the year as Japan's leader. He had recovered from criticism surrounding his promotion of the «Go to Travel» domestic tourism plan during the middle of winter and an uptick in COVID-19 cases;<sup>2</sup> accordingly, by April Suga was again registering positive net cabinet ratings.<sup>3</sup> The COVID-19 vaccination drive, focused on the vulnerable over-65 population, also offered further hope of stabilizing the COVID-19 situation before the Olympic Games. The situation seemed perfectly set-up for Suga to call a snap election in early September to leverage the expected Olympics-related bump in patriotic sentiment.<sup>4</sup> Hoping to be rewarded for his tenacity and diligence with a robust House of Representatives victory for the ruling LDP-Komeito coalition, the uncharismatic Suga, unconnected to any party faction, would have then been in position to secure, uncontested, three more years as LDP President.

Perceptions of the Japanese government's COVID-19 response would, however, play a major role in Suga's downfall—much like it did for Abe in 2020.<sup>5</sup> Although Japan's policy of containment rather than elimination of COVID-19 was a relative success compared to North American and European countries, both Suga and his predecessor undermined themselves with piecemeal management of the crisis and poor communications.

Immediately prior to the opening of the Summer Olympics, the SARS-CoV-2 Delta variant became the dominant cause of COVID-19 in

2. Sebastian Maslow and Paul O'Shea, 'Japan: Why PM Suga Unexpectedly Stepped Down – And What Happens Next', *The Conversation*, 3 September 2021, <https://theconversation.com/japan-why-pm-suga-unexpectedly-stepped-down-and-what-happens-next-167300>

3. 'RPJ世論調査' (RPJ Opinion Polls), *Real Politics Japan*, 28 April 2022, <https://www.realpolitics.jp/research/pmli.html>.

4. Leika Kihara, 'Japan PM Suga Seen Calling Snap Election After Tokyo Games – Asahi', Reuters, 3 June 2021.

5. Corey Wallace & Giulio Pugliese, 'Japan 2020: Abe's Well-laid Plans Go Awry', *Asia Major* Vol. XXXI/2020, pp.103-146.

the Greater Tokyo Area.<sup>6</sup> A record spike in cases and increasing burdens on the medical system forced the government to announce a spectator-less Olympics alongside a fourth state of emergency. The government then announced, after the Olympics had started, that only serious COVID-19 cases would be hospitalized. The media coverage of this announcement, which meant even moderate cases would have to recuperate at home, was particularly brutal.<sup>7</sup> Evaluations of the government's COVID-19 response, which had been shaky since the pandemic began in March 2020, only became more negative.<sup>8</sup>

July also brought a major electoral setback for Suga. The LDP registered its second worst performance ever in a Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly election in early July, winning only 33 out of 127 seats as the LDP-Komeito coalition failed once again to wrestle back the majority in Japan's largest city. In August, Suga suffered the ignominy of defeat in his hometown during Yokohama's mayoralty race. Suga gave his full support to Okonogi Hachirō, a member of his cabinet, friend of 45 years, and son of Suga's own political mentor, Okonogi Hikosaburō.<sup>9</sup> Okonogi, however, only managed to secure a little over 20% of the total vote. Surrounded by controversy both over plans to build a casino in Yokohama and the national COVID-19 response, the LDP's candidate lost by a negative margin of 12% to a coordinated left-wing opposition in Japan's second largest city. By late August, Suga's net cabinet support ratings had turned strongly negative.<sup>10</sup>

It was clear that the public was ready for a new face,<sup>11</sup> and increasingly so were members of the LDP. Internal party polling showing the LDP's lower house majority potentially at risk set off alarm bells in Nagatachō.<sup>12</sup> Even if the worst-case scenario of the LDP losing its lower house majority appeared farfetched, a large number of LDP parliamentarians were fearful of seeing their political careers end if the LDP went into the election under an uninspiring leader. Due to party's devastating loss in 2009, and

6. 'Japan PM Suga: Coronavirus Infections Rising in Tokyo Area Due Partly to Delta Variant', *Reuters*, 8 July 2021.

7. Isabel Reynolds, 'Japan PM's Plan to Have Mild Virus Cases Stay Home Sparks Anger', *Bloomberg*, 4 August 2021.

8. 'Japan's «Go To Travel» campaign to restart Jan. 2022 or later if virus meds progress', *Mainichi Shinbun*, 11 November 2021; 'Why «Cursed» Olympics Are Pressing Ahead Amid a Pandemic', *The New York Times*, 24 March 2021. 'Japanese Government COVID-19 Response Net Evaluation Rating': *Sigma1 Website*, 25 April, <https://sigma1.files.wordpress.com/2022/04/slide2.jpg>.

9. 'Foundations of Suga's Political Power Are Eroding', *The Japan News*, 18 August 2021.

10. 'RPJ世論調査', *Real Politics Japan*.

11. 'Preferences for Suga Staying as Prime Minister (Various Surveys)', *Sigma1 Website*, 19 July 2021, <https://sigma1.files.wordpress.com/2021/07/slide1.jpg>.

12. '自民「議席減」予測で...総裁選の思惑' (Presidential Election Speculation: Significant Loss of Seats for the LDP?), 27 August 2021, *Nippon Television News*, <https://news.ntv.co.jp/category/politics/930209>.

triumphant return under Abe Shinzō in 2012, the significant turnover in parliamentarians between those two elections resulted in the bifurcation of LDP lower house lawmakers into starkly different generational groups. In July 2021, around 45% of LDP House of Representatives lawmakers still had three terms or less to their name.<sup>13</sup> They lacked the solid local electoral base many senior leaders possessed and considered themselves electorally vulnerable to even moderate swings in public opinion. Suga therefore had no choice but to delay his plans for a post-Olympics House of Representatives snap election.

Suga would now ask the LDP for reappointment as party leader with only a string of by-election and local government electoral losses to his name rather than a general election triumph. His hopes for an uncontested reappointment were instantly dashed as Kishida Fumio, Kōchikai faction head, announced that he would challenge Suga.<sup>14</sup> Conservative stalwarts Shimomura Hakubun and Takaichi Sanae also indicated that they had secured the 20 lawmaker signatures needed to enter the race.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, Suga's polling numbers continued to deteriorate, and the LDP faction bosses, who had backed Suga in 2020 and were initially supportive of his reappointment, now struggled to corral already on-edge junior lawmakers. The Asō faction (53 members) and the Takeshita faction (52 members) were unable to agree on a candidate. Neither could the Hosoda faction (97 members), the largest faction where a majority of its members had been elected three times or less.<sup>16</sup> One notable member of this faction, Fukuda Tatsuo (son and grandson of former prime ministers), suggested that younger lawmakers should defy their faction heads and initiated the creation of an «anti-faction» faction called The Party Renewal Association. This grouping, Fukuda asserted, would serve as a forum for changing how LDP selected its leadership and lead debates on Japan's post-COVID-19 social, economic and global challenges.<sup>17</sup>

13. '自民総裁選、カギ握るのは若手衆院議員...「締め付け」あきらめた派閥も' (Young Lower House Lawmakers Hold Key to LDP Presidential Election...Factions Give up «Clamping Down» on Dissent), 27 August 2021, *Yomiuri Shinbun*, <https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/20210906-OYT1T50263/>.

14. '自民総裁選、岸田氏が出馬表明 菅首相との対立軸鮮明—来月29日投開票決定' (Kishida Announces Candidacy for LDP Presidential Election in Clear Opposition to PM Suga; Vote to be Held on 29<sup>th</sup> September), *Jiji Tsūshin*, 26 August 2021.

15. '高市氏、自民総裁選に重ねて出馬意向「安倍内閣引き継ぐ」' (Takaichi Intends to Run Again in LDP Presidential Election as «Next Abe Cabinet»), *Reuters*, 26 August 2021.

16. '自民総裁選、派閥の結束問われる事態も...若手は「首相支持」に拒否反応' (LDP Presidential Election: Factional Unity Questionable... Newer MPs Members Reject Supporting the PM), *Yomiuri Shinbun*, 27 August 2021.

17. '自民総裁選、若手議員・党風一新の会が変える構図' (The Party Renewal Association Looks to Change Dynamics of LDP Presidential Elections), *Tōyō Keizai*, 14 September 2021.

Suga increasingly appeared as a grey technocrat lacking charisma and incapable of communicating with the population. The discontent among the LDP's «young Turks», who had been patiently waiting for years during the Abe governments for a change of guard and opportunities to take on senior party and cabinet roles, presaged a generational tug of war, exploited masterfully by Abe and his allies (see below). Suga's dreams of a long administration were undermined, and the powerful (and octogenarian) Secretary General Nikai Toshihiro,<sup>18</sup> Suga's political «birth parent»,<sup>19</sup> was isolated within the LDP and even criticized by his own faction (47 members) for having backed Suga.<sup>20</sup> Eventually, faction bosses made it clear to Suga that he would lose a contested LDP leadership race. Former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō and his associate Asō Tarō, reportedly pressured Suga to make way for new faces with greater electoral appeal. Even Suga's key supporters, such as his Minister of the Environment, Koizumi Shinjirō, recommended Suga to preserve his long-term influence within the party rather than go down in flames.<sup>21</sup> Eventually, Suga announced his intention not to run for the LDP leadership in early September, effectively also announcing his resignation as prime minister.

### 3. Suga's Legacy

Suga was widely perceived (rightly or wrongly) as a caretaker prime minister following Abe's sudden resignation in 2020. After all, he had left the composition of Abe's cabinet and the leadership of the LDP more or less intact. Moreover, Abe's former Chief Cabinet Secretary did not belong to a major LDP political faction, still crucial to making and unmaking party leaderships in Japan, as evidenced by Abe and Asō's lobbying to dismount Suga from the party leadership once his popularity plummeted.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, Suga distinguished himself in several areas in his one year in office.

18. 'Generational Divide Clashes with Factions in Japan's Ruling Party', *Nikkei Asia*, 5 September 2021.

19. 'Foundations of Suga's Political Power Are Eroding', *The Japan News*.

20. Shigeta Shunsuke, 'Suga Looks to Replace Japan's «Kingmaker» Nikai in Party Shake-up', *Nikkei Asia*, 31 August 2021; '総裁選、菅首相支える二階派に異変「若手死んでしまう」' (Change in Nikai Faction's Support for PM Suga: «New MPs Will be Wiped Out»), *Asahi Shimbun*, 27 August 2021.

21. '「お前と一緒に沈められねえだろ」退陣表明前夜、2Aから首相に三くだり半' («We Won't Sink with You»: the «2As» Delivered Divorce Letter to the Prime Minister the Night Before Suga Announced Unwillingness to Run), *Nishi Nippon Shimbun*, 4 September 2021; Satoshi Sugiyama, 'A Behind-the-scenes Look at Suga's Shocking Decision to Quit the LDP Race', *The Japan Times*, 5 September 2021.

22. On the endurance of traditional LDP institutions and powerbrokers, see: Ellis Krauss and Robert Pekkanen, *The Rise and Fall of Japan's LDP: Political Party Organizations as Historical Institutions*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2011.

In line with the major state-led investment plans of other mature economies in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as Biden's ambitious infrastructure policies and the European Union's fiscal expansionary budgets in favour of digitalization and green technology transitions, Prime Minister Suga made a decisive turn in favour of Japan's digitalization and, to a lesser extent, energy transition.<sup>23</sup> Japan's Digital Agency was established in September as Japan pushed the rollout of digital vaccine certificates for both domestic use and international travel. While not as ambitious as his Western counterparts' massive domestic investments and fiscal spending, Suga continued the use of expansionary fiscal policy in 2021.<sup>24</sup> There were signs of economic recovery during 2021, despite the intermittent pandemic-related state of emergency declarations restraining domestic demand. Real GDP grew by 1.7% during 2021 after registering -4.8% in 2020. Thanks to Suga's stimulus measures and eventual stabilization of COVID-19's spread, there was an improvement of 2.7% in consumer spending during the third quarter of the Japanese fiscal year under Kishida. While the year ended on a positive economic note, Japan's real GDP was still 2.9% below its pre-pandemic level.<sup>25</sup>

In the foreign policy domain, Suga largely followed in the footsteps of his predecessor. Suga was even said to have effectively delegated his foreign and security policy to Japan's Ministries of Foreign Affairs and of Defence, as he endorsed the promotion of bureaucrats close to Abe team within the National Security Secretariat. In fact, direct testimonies from highly-ranking policy officials suggest that while Suga was very much hands-on with regards to domestic policymaking and swifter than Abe, he preferred to delegate on foreign and security policy matters.<sup>26</sup> Suga's premiership will, however, be remembered for a more decisive turn in favour of Taiwan's defence, including in summit discussions with his American, European and G7 counterparts. Nonetheless, these policy adaptations should be ascribed primarily to Defence Minister Kishi Nobuo and his brother, former Premier Abe, who continued to act as Suga's mentor in foreign affairs (see below).<sup>27</sup>

23. Robert Ward, 'Suga's Premiership: A Short-lived but Packed Administration', *International Institute of Strategic Studies*, 3 September 2021, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2021/09/suga-yoshihide-short-lived-premiership>.

24. 'Draft of Suga's First Economic Policy Contains No Clear Vision', *The Asahi Shimbun*, 11 June 2021.

25. Michael Wolf, 'Japan: Headed for Uneven Recovery in the First Half', *Deloitte Insights*, 18 March 2022, <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/economy/asia-pacific/japan-economic-outlook.html>; Shujiro Urata, 'Japan's New Model of Capitalism in an Uncertain World', *East Asia Forum*, 15 February 2022, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/02/15/japans-new-model-of-capitalism-in-an-uncertain-world/>.

26. Interview with a high-ranking Japanese diplomat, 10 February 2022.

27. Kishi is Abe's full, natural younger brother. However, shortly after his birth, Kishi was adopted by his maternal uncle and lived with his grandfather, Kishi Nobusuke. Tomohiro Osaki, 'Nobuo Kishi, Abe's Younger Brother, Seeks to Carve Out New Role as Japan's Defense Chief', *The Japan Times*, 17 September 2020.

#### 4. Suga's Replacement

With Suga's resignation the race to become LDP president and Japan's next prime minister became wide open. The focus shifted to four LDP politicians who had consistently registered robust public support to take over Japan's top job during the Suga administration: Abe Shinzō, Koizumi Shinjirō, Ishiba Shigeru, and Kōno Tarō. However, only Kōno would eventually contest the election. After four consecutive losses in LDP presidential elections, Ishiba, former LDP secretary general and minister of Defence, finally seemed to accept in 2021 that his fellow LDP parliamentarians would not back him. One of the major reasons for Suga's victory in 2020 was the «anyone-but-Ishiba» movement engineered by then Secretary General Nikai, who manoeuvred the four largest factions to uniformly back Suga. Ishiba eventually backed Kōno in 2021. The also still popular Koizumi, who had previously backed fellow Kanagawa parliamentarian Suga,<sup>28</sup> soon announced his support for Kōno when Suga stepped down and Kōno stepped in to contest the race.

Backed by two popular party notables, Kōno built up his support among both the general public and the LDP paid-up membership.<sup>29</sup> He appealed to vulnerable lawmakers worried about losing their seats by arguing that he was their best chance for them to hold on to their seats, given his generally positive public profile. Never shy about wanting to become prime minister, Kōno seemed to be in a commanding position. Only the failed 2020 candidate, Kishida Fumio, and Takaichi Sanae and Noda Seiko, both unconnected to any party faction and former ministers of Internal Affairs and Communications, stood in Kōno's way. Why then, did Kōno not eventually prevail in the LDP election?

The relatively young and popular Kōno Tarō, the scion of a family of powerful Japanese politicians of moderate conservative extraction, would have made a charismatic LDP president and boosted the ruling party's victory chances in the general election. Popular among the electorate and members of the LDP from factions other than his own (the powerful Asō faction),<sup>30</sup> Kōno had earned prominence both under Abe, as minister of Foreign Affairs and Defence, and under Suga, as minister for Administrative and Regulatory Reform and minister responsible for the COVID-19 vaccine rollout. However, Kōno's strong past positions against civil nuclear power, as

28. 'Suga Gains Passive Support to Continue as Ruling Party Leader', *The Japan News*, 18 August 2021.

29. Corey Wallace, 'The 2021 LDP Leadership Election: A Primer', *Tokyo Review*, 17 September 2021, <https://www.tokyoreview.net/2021/09/the-2021-ldp-leadership-election-a-primer/>.

30. '次の首相に、河野氏トップ31% 石破氏26%、岸田氏は18%'(Support as Next Prime Minister: Mr. Kōno Ahead with 31% of Support, Mr. Ishiba with 26% and Mr. Kishida with 18%), *Kyodo Tsūshin*, 5 September 2021.

well as more progressive positions on social issues, including being in favour of the ascension of a woman to the imperial throne, made him unpalatable to most hard-line conservatives.<sup>31</sup> Known as a political maverick, Kōno prevailing would also have represented a greater discontinuity in terms of the LDP's traditional balance of power, clearing the way for him to undertake party reform and challenge entrenched party interests. Ultimately, LDP powerbrokers exploited the system the LDP uses for selecting its leaders to side-line the ambitious Kōno.<sup>32</sup>

The 2021 LDP presidential election turned out to be the most competitive in a decade, garnering significant media attention. Paid-up party member turnout improved from 61.4% to 69% compared to the last full party election in 2018 as 760,075 members cast valid postal votes. Fifty percent of first round votes (382) were then allocated to the four candidates on the basis of these paid-up party members' postal votes. As the results of these votes were being reported by the LDP prefectural chapter organizations, 382 LDP parliamentarians from both houses cast individual votes for one of the candidates, bringing the first-round total to 764. Kōno as expected prevailed in the paid-up party member «popular vote», winning 38 out of 47 prefectures and a plurality of 44.1% of national votes. Kishida took 28.9% of these votes, while Takaichi Sanae (backed by Abe) and Noda Seiko took 19.4% and 7.6% respectively.<sup>33</sup>

With the help of faction heads, who in the final week of the campaign reasserted modest control over their factions, Kishida managed to make up the difference between himself and Kōno in LDP parliamentary votes, eking out a single vote first-round majority (256 to 255) to send the contest to a run-off. This run-off would again allocate one vote to every LDP parliamentarian, while the postal votes of party members would be reflected in a paltry 47 votes – one for each prefecture. This system made a run-off the ideal outcome for factional heads wishing to assert greater control over the eventual outcome. Kishida and Takaichi, with the blessing of Abe, had

31. ‘皇位継承、原発で河野氏「持論封印」保守系への配慮、もろ刃の剣か」(Mr. Kōno «Seals up his Long-held Beliefs» on Imperial Succession and Nuclear Power Stations out of Consideration for Conservative Forces. Is this a Double-edged Sword?), *Maimichi Shinbun*, 10 September 2021.

32. Rob Fahey, ‘The First Challenge for Japan’s New Prime Minister is Party Unity’, *Tokyo Review*, 29 September 2021, <https://www.tokyoreview.net/2021/09/japan-prime-minister-kishida-party-unity/>; ‘自民・甘利税調会長が河野氏に皮肉「迷走したのに評価上がった」」(LDP Tax Commission Chairperson Amari’s Sarcastic Remark on Kōno: «He Manages to Gain Support Despite Poor Performance»), *Asahi Shinbun*, 6 September 2021.

33. ‘第27代自民党総裁に岸田文雄衆議院議員が決定’(Representative Fumio Kishida Selected as 27th LDP President), *Liberal Democratic Party of Japan Website*, 29 September 2021, <https://www.jimin.jp/news/information/202062.html>.

already formed an «anyone-but-Kōno» front on the eve of the election,<sup>34</sup> allowing Kishida to prevail over Kōno by 257 votes to 170 in the run-off to become LDP president and Japan's new prime minister.<sup>35</sup>

This result punctuated the re-emergence of Abe as a force within the party after his resignation in 2020. While the rumours of an Abe third coming in Nagatachō to replace Suga always seemed unrealistic,<sup>36</sup> Abe throughout 2021 joined a covert intra-party struggle with Secretary General Nikai Toshihiro for the control over party funding, top party executive posts, and China policy.<sup>37</sup> Abe, although favourable to Kishida, who was initially his preferred successor over Suga,<sup>38</sup> also encouraged Takaichi to enter the race. Noda Seiko also conveniently managed to find a 20<sup>th</sup> LDP lawmaker signature to back her candidacy at the last moment. This made it very difficult for any candidate to win a majority in the party popular vote and made a run-off almost inevitable. Abe's endorsement of the ultra-conservative Takaichi showcased his clout and signalled the need for other candidates to align with his political views, although his own faction (Hosoda) didn't completely align with him – for example, Fukuda backed Kishida in the first round.<sup>39</sup> Abe's moves nevertheless presaged a negotiation between the two main LDP factions to prevent Kōno from dismantling the political agenda of the former premier. While Kishida is not necessarily an ideological ally of the LDP's revisionist wing, the birth of his administration has been imprinted with the logic of a continuity that started with Abe, passed through Suga, and persists with a «re-booted» Kishida.

34. '岸田氏と高市氏の陣営、決選投票の協力で一致 自民党総裁選' (The Kishida and Takaichi Camps Team-up for Final Ballot of the LDP Presidential Elections), *Asahi Shinbun*, 29 September 2021; Fahey, 'The First Challenge for Japan's New Prime Minister is Party Unity'.

35. '第27代自民党総裁に岸田文雄衆議院議員が決定', *Liberal Democratic Party of Japan Website*.

36. Corey Wallace, 'Where are Ishiba and Koizumi? And a Third Coming of Abe?', *Sigma I Website*, 17 September 2021, <https://sigma1.wordpress.com/2021/09/17/where-are-ishiba-and-koizumi-and-a-third-coming-of-abe/>.

37. Yora Masao, 'The 3A-2F War: The Veiled Election-Year Struggle Inside the LDP', *Nippon.com*, 18 August 2021.

38. Eric Johnston, 'Meet the «Shadow Shogun» Behind the Making of Japan's Next Prime Minister', *Japan Times*, 11 September, 2020; Yora Masao, 'Kishida's Far-sighted Plan to Keep Abe in Check', *Nippon.com*, 31 January 2022.

39. '「安倍晋三が担ぐ高市早苗」が安倍派でものすごく嫌われる理由' (Why is «Abe Shinzō's Darling Takaichi Sanae» Hated by Members of Abe's Faction?), *Diamond Online*, 23 November 2021.



### 5. The Lower House Election: Kishida Survives and Thrives

New Prime Minister Kishida Fumio sought to take the initiative by appointing a cabinet full of new faces, with 13 out of 22 new members being first timers. Kishida also did not waste any time calling an election, seeking to take advantage of the appearance of a refreshed leadership, the downward trend in COVID-19 infections, and improving evaluation of governmental response.<sup>40</sup> Kishida's initial cabinet ratings were, however, very low for a new prime minister, not much above the initial ratings of historically unpopular one-year prime ministers Mori Yoshirō (2000-2001) and Asō (2008-2009).<sup>41</sup> They were also on average 14% less positive than those of Suga's only one year prior.<sup>42</sup> Kishida's promises of party reform were not entirely convincing,<sup>43</sup> and, in the eyes of the public, Kishida first appeared to be the «establishment» candidate, with strong ties to the Abe administration.<sup>44</sup> After all, Kishida initially appointed Amari Akira, a hawkish politician close to Abe and Asō, as LDP secretary general, Takaichi Sanae to the role of chairperson of the General Policy Council, the ruling party's internal think-tank, and Kishi Nobuo – Abe's brother – retained the defence portfolio.<sup>45</sup> While Kishida notably managed to move aside nine-year deputy premier Asō Tarō from the powerful Minister of Finance role, his replacement was Suzuki Shunichi, Asō's brother in law.

These lacklustre initial ratings resulted in some consternation in the LDP due to the opposition being much more coordinated than it had been in many years.<sup>46</sup> For example, in the previous House of Representatives election in October 2017, the then still popular governor of Tokyo, Koike Yuriko, inserted herself in national politics when she oversaw the formation of the 'Party of Hope' (*Kibō no Tō*). While ostensibly formed to challenge

40. 'Evaluation of Japanese Government COVID-19 Response', *Sigma1 Website*, 25 April 2022, <https://sigma1.files.wordpress.com/2022/04/slide1.jpg>.

41. '岸田内閣支持 40.3% 発足時、安倍・菅内閣に及ばず一時世論調査' (Jiji Poll: Kishida Cabinet Support at 40.3%, Lower Than Abe and Suga Cabinets on Inauguration), *Jiji Tsūshin*, 15 October 2021.

42. 'Figure 2: Comparison of Suga, Kishida and Abe's Initial Cabinet Approval (Disapproval) Ratings', *Sigma1 Website*, 18 October 2021, <https://sigma1.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/slide2.jpg>.

43. Bryce Wakefield, 'Another Year, Another Prime Minister for Japan', *East Asia Forum*, 6 October 2021, <https://www.easiaforum.org/2021/10/06/another-year-another-prime-minister-for-japan/>.

44. Corey Wallace, 'Japan's General Election: A Primer', *Tokyo Review*, 19 October 2021, <https://www.tokyoreview.net/2021/10/japans-general-election-the-main-contending-parties/>.

45. 'Kishida's Picks for Top LDP Posts Dampen Hopes for Reform', *Asahi Shinbun*, 2 October 2021.

46. 'ご祝儀相場なき岸田内閣 伸び悩んだ支持率、背景にある「距離感」' (Honeymoon-less Kishida Cabinet Approval Rating Sluggish, «Sense of Distance» in the Background), *Asahi Shinbun*, 6 October 2021.

Prime Minister Abe, Koike's intervention eventually helped the LDP as her gambit set off a rapid realignment of party loyalties.<sup>47</sup> This realignment, however, ended hopes of coordination between the leading opposition Democratic Party (*Minshintō*) and other opposition parties, and split the main opposition party into Hope, the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDPJ), rump *Minshintō* and assorted independents (many of them would later join the Democratic Party for the People or *Kokumin-minshutō*). The result was that in the 2017 lower house election the opposition parties ran candidates against each other in 226 out of 289 single member districts (SMDs). The much better coordinated LDP-Komeito ruling coalition unsurprisingly prevailed in 183 of these districts (80.1%).<sup>48</sup>

This time around, however, the left-leaning opposition coordinated in advance to ensure overlap was limited to just 70 seats out of the 289 SMDs.<sup>49</sup> The *Asahi Shinbun* excitedly noted that, going by simple electoral math, if opposition candidates had similarly coordinated in 2017 as they did in 2021, they could have doubled their success rate in SMD seats and deprived the LDP of a majority, making it dependent on Komeito in both houses of parliament.<sup>50</sup> CDPJ's Edano Yukio even raised the possibility of an opposition victory, giving it the same chance as Major League Baseball sensation Ōtani Shōhei's 2021 batting average – 0.257 (25.7%); on his part, Kishida entertained the possibility of the LDP losing its majority.<sup>51</sup> The Yokohama mayoral election had, after all, already demonstrated that coordination could be profitable. Even if the LDP-Komeito ruling coalition retained power, a major reduction in LDP seats would deal a major blow to the long-term viability of Kishida's administration with a House of Councilor's election due only eight months later, portending a return to the era of revolving door leadership.

On 31 October, Japanese voters elected the 49<sup>th</sup> House of Representatives after the Diet's first full four year-term in 45 years. It turned out that

47. Corey Wallace, 'Koike's Challenge to Japan's Political Status Quo', *East Asia Forum*, 19 June 2017, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/06/19/koikes-challenge-to-japans-political-status-quo/>; 'Losing Hope in Japan's Snap Election', *East Asia Forum*, 18 October 2017, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/10/18/losing-hope-in-japans-snap-election/>.

48. Tajima Yoshihiko and Ishimatsu Tsune, '野党一本化なら63選挙区で勝敗逆転 得票合算の試算'(Combined Vote Totals: If Opposition Parties Had United, Could Have Reversed Results of 63 Electoral Districts), *Asahi Shinbun*, 23 October 2017.

49. '衆院選へ野党一本化が加速' (Unification of Opposition Parties Accelerates Ahead of House of Representatives Election), *Tokyo Shinbun*, 8 October 2021.

50. Tajima and Ishimatsu, '野党一本化なら63選挙区で勝敗逆転 得票合算の試算'.

51. '枝野氏「大谷選手の打率くらい」衆院選での政権交代可能性' (Edano's Estimate of Regime Change Possibility in Lower House Election: «About Ōtani's Batting Average»), *Tokyo Shinbun*, 12 October 2021.

predictions of the opposition making major inroads into the LDP's majority were far too optimistic. The ruling party lost only 15 seats in the House of Representatives but managed to maintain an absolute majority of 261 seats, which allowed it to keep a majority in all lower house parliamentary committees and chair them. The LDP's coalition partner, Komeito, increased its tally of seats from 29 to 32. Conversely, the largest opposition party, the Japan Constitutional Democratic Party, was the biggest loser from the elections: it lost 14 seats of the 110 it held in the House of Representatives despite initial optimism of increasing its parliamentary contingent.<sup>52</sup> Despite the moderate loss of seats, the outcome was also a major victory for Kishida personally, especially considering that the pandemic and economic aftershocks of the third quarter of 2021 were still rattling Japanese society.

Ultimately, the opposition could not overcome the LDP and Komeito electoral machines in a short period of time – only 12 days of campaigning. The opposition also struggled to register any salience after having been put on the back foot by Suga's resignation and having been deprived of political oxygen by the priceless and saturated media coverage the LDP received during one of the most dynamic Japanese leadership races in years. Moreover, Kishida stole the thunder from the opposition parties by dissolving the Diet soon after his victory.<sup>53</sup> The opposition also miscalculated the degree to which the electorate would be turned off by the CPDJ-JCP alignment at the centre of opposition coordination. In 2021, a number of these voters supported the more centrist DFPF, or the right-leaning *Ishin no Kai*, or stayed at home.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, voter turnout only reached 55.93%, the third lowest mark in post-war Japan.<sup>55</sup> Japan's left-leaning opposition also struggled to come to terms with its own declining popularity, as party support for the CDPJ fell constantly between the 2017 and 2021 House of Representatives elections.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, while Kishida was not wildly popular in the run up to the election, he was not unpopular, especially as he lacked the ideological baggage carried by Abe and his revisionist allies over the years. The modest

52. 2021年衆院選：自公で絶対安定多数過半数確保 岸田政権継続へ (2021 Lower House Elections: LDP and Komeito Retain Solid Majority—Kishida Government Set to Continue), *Nippon.com*, 1 November 2021, <https://www.nippon.com/ja/japan-data/h01141/>.

53. Michael MacArthur Bosack, 'How the LDP Keeps Winning', *Japan Times*, October 12 2021.

54. Wallace, 'Japan's General Election'.

55. '衆院選 最終投票率は戦後3番目に低い55.93%' (Post-war Japan's Third Lowest Voter Turnout for Lower House Elections at 55.93%), *NHK News*, 1 November 2021.

56. 'Figure 4: Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan Party Support: 2017 versus 2021', *Sigma1 Website*, 18 October 2021, <https://sigma1.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/slide4.jpg>.

increase in support his cabinet enjoyed over Suga's was ultimately helpful.<sup>57</sup> Kishida's leadership of the LDP may have also helped keep Komeito voters disciplined due to perceived prior affinity between Kishida and Komeito on national security, welfare and distribution issues.<sup>58</sup>

The Ishin no Kai was, however, the biggest winner of the 2021 lower house election. The face of the party, Osaka Governor Yoshimura Hirofumi, had been a constant presence on Japanese television throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and won plaudits for clear and confident political communication.<sup>59</sup> Ahead of the election, Ishin emphasised its Osaka roots, sharpened its pro-reform message, and became more strident in critiquing the government for vested interests and poor performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. The party had previously built close relations with the LDP during the Abe-Suga years, and was increasingly perceived as "supplementary" to the ruling coalition.<sup>60</sup> Distancing itself from the government appeared to pay dividends for Ishin as it won all 15 SMDs in Osaka Prefecture that it contested. It also took the highest number of proportional representation seats in the Kinki (Kansai) region, and Ishin's representation in the lower house almost quadrupled as its parliamentary contingent rose from 11 members pre-election to 41 on election evening.

This performance made Ishin the third largest political force in the country, overtaking the LDP's coalition partner, Komeito. There was some post-election speculation that Ishin's now offered the LDP an alternative to a perceived intransigent Komeito when it came to national security and constitutional revision issues. Ishin will, however, need to repeat the performance in consecutive elections for the LDP's powerbrokers to truly consider it a viable coalition partner. Komeito voters, after all, provide invaluable nationwide support that is often the decisive difference between many LDP parliamentarians winning their SMD seats and not. For the foreseeable future, Japanese democracy will likely remain structurally centred on the LDP and Komeito, allowing for continued one-and-a-half-party dominance.<sup>61</sup>

57. 'Kishida Cabinet's Approval Rate at 55% Ahead of General Election', *Kyodo News*, 5 October 2021.

58. '公明、ハト派・岸田氏に好意的 山口氏「衆院選へ結束」' (Komeito's Yamaguchi Expresses Approval of Dovish Kishida: «Onward to the Lower House Election»), *Jiji Tsūshin*, 29 September 2021.

59. 'What's Behind Japan Innovation Party's Major Breakthrough in General election?', *Mainichi Japan*, 2 November 2021.

60. 'Japan's Ishin Party Seeks to Shake up Status Quo in July Election', *Nikkei Asia*, 19 March 2022.

61. The authors are indebted to Sebastian Maslow for the reference: Arthur Stockwin, 'Explaining one-party dominance in Japanese politics', *East Asia Forum*, 19 January 2018.

## 6. Prime Minister Kishida: Reboot or Reinvention?

Kishida reinvented himself somewhat over 2021. He did so to position himself to appeal more broadly to the wider LDP electorate, still greatly influenced by the domestic, economic, and foreign policies of Abe. For example, Kishida moved decisively towards using aggressive monetary and expansionary fiscal policy as a major tool for accelerating Japan's post-COVID-19 recovery. Kishida's economic approach differs from Abe's, at least rhetorically, by focusing more on redistribution to reduce inequalities and socioeconomic insecurities through fiscal spending. Announcing that he would release Japan from the strictures of neo-liberalism by adopting a «new Japanese capitalism», Kishida asserted as a candidate for Japan's leadership that he would pursue a «Reiwa-style» income doubling plan for the middle class.<sup>62</sup> This recalled Prime Minister Ikeda Hayato (1960-1964), the progenitor of Kishida's faction in the 1960s, whose own wildly successful income doubling plan massively increased Japan's GDP, accelerated its technological and industrial development, while at the same time reducing socioeconomic inequalities.<sup>63</sup> Thus, to distinguish himself from Abe, who oversaw impressive stock market growth and improved corporate balance sheets and profits through his *Abenomics* approach, Kishida emphasised that he would more aggressively focus on raising wages. Kishida said he would encourage executives to raise the wages of workers by 3% in Japan's annual wage negotiations between businesses and unions, making available generous tax offsets to those corporations that complied. Nevertheless, *Kishidanomics* still operated along the lines of *Abenomics*, favouring state intervention as Kishida prioritized generous expansionary fiscal and monetary policies to counter the fallout of the pandemic on the Japanese economy at the beginning of his administration.<sup>64</sup> Kishida also remained sensitive to corporate interests, exemplified by his backing away from the talk of redistribution after rattling the business community with his rhetoric.<sup>65</sup>

In foreign and security policy, Kishida also promised continuity. He committed to continue developing Abe's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision. Kishida himself was head of the foreign ministry – the longest-serving foreign minister in the post-war era – when the then-FOIP strategy was unveiled in 2016, but the architecture of FOIP is traceable back to

62. Morinobu Shigeki, 'Prime Minister Kishida's Growth and Redistribution Strategy: Will it Work?', *Tokyo Foundation for Policy Research*, 1 November 2021, <https://www.tkfd.or.jp/en/research/detail.php?id=862>.

63. Kazuaki Nagata, 'Kishida Wants to Succeed where Past PMs Failed by Actually Raising Wages', *Japan Times*, 30 September 2021.

64. '2021年政権公約- 総合政策集' (2021 LDP Manifesto: Collection of General Policies), Liberal Democratic Party, 18 October 2021, p.105 [https://jimin.jp-east-2.storage.api.nifcloud.com/pdf/pamphlet/20211018\\_j-file\\_pamphlet.pdf](https://jimin.jp-east-2.storage.api.nifcloud.com/pdf/pamphlet/20211018_j-file_pamphlet.pdf).

65. 'Japan PM Kishida to Seek Economic Growth before Redistributing Wealth', *Kyodo News*, 11 October 2021.

Abe's entourage and the Prime Minister's Office. Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu was also reappointed under Kishida, meaning that Motegi's tenure as foreign minister spanned three consecutive premierships from Abe to Kishida.<sup>66</sup> Kishida fulfilled a pledge to inaugurate a Ministry of Economic Security in the Cabinet Office (i.e. a Ministry without portfolio), which he assigned to Kobayashi Takayuki, a young and Harvard-educated politician. Together with Amari Akira, former minister of Economy, Trade and Industry, Kishida had worked on the «economic security» agenda during his time as LDP policy chief at the end of the Abe administration. An economic security bureau was added to the National Security Secretariat in 2020. Moreover, prime minister Kishida also set up party and government committees to oversee the development of economic security legislation to enshrine these measures in a new National Security Strategy.<sup>67</sup>

The legislation will likely empower the new economic security minister to broadly identify and address Japan's global supply chain vulnerabilities, ensure high-tech infrastructure at home is not vulnerable to foreign manipulation and disruption, and exercise greater control over technology transfer of sensitive dual use technologies while protecting intellectual property. The agenda also points to the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) being more proactive in its traditional focus on maintaining Japan's technological advantages in existing areas of strength, such as materials science, robotics, sensor technologies. The same agenda also aims to support Japan playing an increased role in the international development of technology and standards for so-called game changing technologies with major civilian-military applications (AI, 5/6G, and cyber systems). The Kishida government announced an initial fund of around US\$ 875 million for investments in artificial intelligence and quantum technology, biotechnology, and robotics, and also promised to establish a US\$ 87.5 billion fund for universities and basic research, suggesting the return of the Japanese entrepreneurial state.<sup>68</sup>

### 7. *Japan's International Relations under a Biden Presidency*

The year in review opened with the inauguration of the Biden presidency in January 2021. After four tumultuous years under Trump, when Japan's leaders took advantage of the opportunities offered by the Trump presidency to counter and restrain the People's Republic of China (PRC), but never felt completely sure of Japan's standing in the alliance and in the White House,

66. *Ibid.*

67. Akira Igata & Brad Glosserman, 'Japan's New Economic Statecraft', *The Washington Quarterly*, 2021, 44:3, 25-42.

68. 'Japan to Set Up Advanced-Tech Fund with Eye on Economic Security', *Nikkei Asia*, 17 October 2021.

the Biden administration at least promised consistency. Preliminary phone calls and consultations with the incoming President suggested a somewhat different approach to the Indo-Pacific, but to Japanese (and Australian) policymakers' relief, the US administration eventually maintained the «Free and Open Indo-Pacific» policy vision that Japanese officials had been able to successfully sell to the Trump administration.<sup>69</sup> In fact, the Biden administration wanted to showcase that the US was back at the forefront of international politics («*America is back*») to allies and adversaries alike.

While the US government emphasized discontinuity with the previous Trump administration in aggressively tackling transnational security threats, such as climate change and pandemics, it underlined continuity in its prioritization of strategic competition with the PRC.<sup>70</sup> In fact, the newly-appointed Indo-Pacific «czar» in the White House, the very same Kurt Campbell who was previously responsible for the Obama administration's «Pivot to Asia», asserted the United States' need to compete and negotiate with Chinese leaders from a position of strength. This thinking likely pleased some Japanese policymakers who had long advocated for a more coercive turn in Washington's China policy.<sup>71</sup>

The White House National Security Council also engaged in proactive outreach to the region. The first ever summit meeting between the leaders of Australia, Japan, India and the United States on 12 March 2021 was shortly followed with in-presence Security Consultative Committee (aka «2+2») meetings between the US Secretaries of State and of Defense with their Japanese and (separately) Korean counterparts.<sup>72</sup> The Japan-US Security Consultative Committee meeting in Tokyo was noteworthy because Japanese and US policymakers criticized in detail China's aggressive behaviour in its near abroad, and more importantly, they enunciated their support for «peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait» for the first time since the noteworthy Security Consultative Committee meeting of Spring 2005.<sup>73</sup> The decisive diplomatic signalling was clearly aimed at showing that

69. Yūtarō Yamamoto, '自由で開かれたインド太平洋誕生秘話' (The secret story behind the Free and Open Indo-Pacific) *NHK*, 30 June 2021; Yūichi Hosoya, 'インド太平洋地域における「自由」と「開放性」の終わりか?' (Is this the end of the Indo-Pacific region's 'Freedom' and 'Openness'?), 15 November 2021.

70. An early proof of the relative continuity with the Trump administration's 2017 National Security Strategy's prioritization of China is the following document: The White House, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, 3 March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

71. Y.A. (pseudonym), 'The Virtues of a Confrontational China Strategy', *The American Interest*, 10 April 2020.

72. US Department of State, *Secretary Blinken's Travel to Tokyo and Seoul*, 10 March 2021, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-travel-to-tokyo-and-seoul/>.

73. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Japan-US Security Consultative Committee* (Japan-US «2+2»), 16 March 2021, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/na/st/page3e001112.html>.

the new US administration prized its alliances to «negotiate from a position of strength» with Beijing, as testified by Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Tokyo.<sup>74</sup> Biden's key national security decisionmakers arranged a meeting with Chinese counterparts following these meetings (including one between Secretary of Defense Austin and his Indian counterpart, Rajnath Singh).

Testifying to Japan's importance in overall US foreign and security policy calculations, Biden invited Suga as the first foreign leader in the White House after his inauguration. The conservative Suga government arguably saw mostly eye-to-eye with the US to advance synergies in the military, diplomatic, economic and technology arenas, as posited in last year's essay.<sup>75</sup> In fact, the expansive scope for US-Japan cooperation was reaffirmed by Washington's new initiatives. At the first (virtual) summit meeting of the component states of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) in March 2021,<sup>76</sup> the US called for coordination on the supply of vaccines and the management of emerging technologies. These pledges in favour of technological cooperation had already been made with Japan,<sup>77</sup> and in 2021, the US clearly tried to tie up cooperation with «like-minded partners». This policy was reflected in the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) agreement, principally aimed at sharing and co-developing key military and dual-use technology, and the establishment of the EU-US Trade and Technology Council.<sup>78</sup>

#### 8. *Taiwan's Prominence in Japan's 2021 Strategic Debate*<sup>79</sup>

One of the most notable strategic developments in 2021 was Japanese political leadership's facilitation of a set of new firsts in bilateral relations with

74. US Department of State, *Secretary Antony J. Blinken with Izumi Oguri of Nippon TV*, 17 March 2021, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-with-izumi-oguri-of-nippon-tv/>.

75. Corey Wallace & Giulio Pugliese, 'Japan 2020: Abe's Well-laid Plans Go Awry'.

76. White House, 'Quad Leaders' Joint Statement: «The Spirit of the Quad», White House Briefing Room, 12 March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/12/quad-leaders-joint-statement-the-spirit-of-the-quad/>.

77. Press Release, 'Joint Statement on the 12th U.S.-Japan Policy Cooperation Dialogue on the Internet Economy', *U.S. Department of State*, 18 November 2021, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-12th-u-s-japan-policy-cooperation-dialogue-on-the-internet-economy/>; Corey Wallace & Giulio Pugliese, 'Japan 2020: Abe's Well-laid Plans Go Awry'.

78. White House, 'Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS', *White House Briefing Room*, 15 September 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/15/joint-leaders-statement-on-aukus/>.

79. Portions of this chapter are reprinted with permission from Oxford Analytica based on Giulio Pugliese's analysis: 'Tokyo Will Move Closer to Washington on Taiwan', *Oxford Analytica*, 29 September 2021.



Taiwan, alongside growing coordination with Washington. The Biden administration pushed on an open-door when it enlisted the Japanese government in support of «peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait», as the joint statement from the two countries' leaders put it in April.<sup>80</sup> In the face of China's authoritarian regression and assertiveness in disputed seas, Japan's political elite and news media have more readily linked Japan's security and democratic identity with the plight of Taiwan throughout 2020 and 2021 – a far cry from the previous absence of systematic debate on Taiwanese security. In fact, these trends have empowered new institutional actors such as the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's Taiwan Policy Project Team – a pro-Taiwan grouping established in March within the main ruling party's Foreign Affairs Division.<sup>81</sup> The same group was behind the landmark legislator-level 2+2 meeting with Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party in August,<sup>82</sup> the first time the LDP accepted Taiwanese requests to hold official security-related talks.<sup>83</sup>

Taiwan also featured more in the LDP presidential contest than it had for over 50 years.<sup>84</sup> Takaichi argued that Japan should deploy its military to support a US response to any emergency or conflict over Taiwan – something which Japanese officials increasingly suggest could be done under the 2015 peace and security legislation.<sup>85</sup> Takaichi also benefitted from an opportunity during the campaign to have an online discussion with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen where both politicians agreed on the importance of promoting exchanges between Japan and Taiwan in economic and security domains.<sup>86</sup> Kishida and Kōno also reaffirmed during the race their previous concerns about the threat China poses to Taiwan and the im-

80. *Ibid.*

81. 'In Support of Taiwan, Japan's Ruling Party Buries Old Rivalries', *Nikkei Asia*, 5 March 2021.

82. '日台「与党版2プラス2」初開催 対中抑止を議論' (Japan-Taiwan «Ruling Parties 2+2» is Kick-started and Aims at Having Discussions on Deterring China), *Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, 27 August 2021; John Feng, 'Taiwan, Japan Urged to «Stand Together» As China Threat Prompts Security Talks', *Newsweek*, 1 September 2021.

83. Ishū Kō, '台湾の安全保障をめぐる日台関係の方向性' (The Direction of Japan-Taiwan Relations Specific to Taiwanese Security), 東亜 (*Tōa*), July 2021, N.7, pp.78-85.

84. '総裁選「中国・台湾」50年ぶり争点に 問われる問合い' (Taiwan-China Issues Focus of LDP Presidential Election for First Time in 50 Years), *Nikkei Shinbun*, 25 September 2021.

85. '台湾有事で集団的自衛権行使も 麻生氏' (Asō: Can Also Use Collective Self-Defence During Taiwan Emergency), *Fiji Tsūshin*, 5 July 2021; Isabel Reynolds and Emi Nobuhiro, 'Fumio Kishida, Top Contender to Lead Japan, Warns Taiwan is «Next Big Problem»', *Bloomberg (Japan Times)*, 3 September 2021.

86. '経済・安保で連携強化を 台湾総統との会談動画公開—自民・高市氏' (Strengthening Economic and Security Ties: Tsai-Takaichi Meeting Video Released), *Fiji Tsūshin*, 21 September 2021.

portance of Taiwan to Japan's defence.<sup>87</sup> Kishida in particular identified Taiwan's security as the «next big problem», noting the need to cooperate with «countries and regions» with shared values of freedom, democracy and the rule of law to constrain authoritarian countries increasingly wielding their power.<sup>88</sup> In 2021, Tokyo also referred to the importance of stability around Taiwan in its annual defence white paper for the first time. Confirmation of Tokyo's plan to deploy missiles and troops to Ishigaki, an island close to the Japan-administered and China-claimed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands – and to Taiwan – accords with US preferences for development of asymmetric capabilities along the so-called «first island chain».<sup>89</sup> Taiwan's Quadrennial Defence Review, released in 2021, explicates its pursuit of an «anti-access and area (A2/AD)» denial strategy along with counterstrike capabilities.<sup>90</sup> While domestic political hurdles are still high in Japan, willingness among the political leadership to move in the same direction is palpable and will assist US aims for having allies play a greater role in deterring China through greater force projection.<sup>91</sup>

US-Japan cooperation over Taiwan also grew visibly throughout 2021, although doubts linger whether Tokyo can move past coordination towards more cooperative approaches, especially in relation to military planning. Japan, after all, has no law like the United States' *Taiwan Relations Act* (1979) that compels Japan to come to the assistance of Taiwan should it face unprovoked attack. However, through provisions in the US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty and 1997 US-Japan defence guidelines, Tokyo plays an indirect role, as it provides military bases to US forces that will certainly be deployed in a cross-Strait crisis and has pledged security support in areas surrounding

87. '岸田・高市・河野氏、そろって「中国に対抗」強調...考えの違いは「グレーゾーン」対応' (Kishida, Takaichi, and Kōno All Stress Need to «Counter China», Difference in Thinking on «Gray Zone» Response), *Yomiuri Shinbun*, 14 September 2021; 'Online Event: Mt. Fuji DC Event: The U.S.-Japan Alliance at 60', *CSIS Website*, 9 September 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/online-event-mt-fuji-dc-event-us-japan-alliance-60>; '元防衛相の河野氏「台湾、尖閣有事にどう備えるか」次期戦闘機の行政レビュー' (Former Defense Minister Kōno During Review on Japan's Next Generation Fighter: «How to Prepare for Taiwan, Senkaku Contingencies?»), *Sankei Shinbun*, 14 November 2020.

88. Isabel Reynolds and Emi Nobuhiro, 'Fumio Kishida, Top Contender to Lead Japan, Warns Taiwan is «Next Big Problem»'.

89. Aurelio Insisa, 'Asia in 2020: Coping with COVID-19 and Other Crises', *Asia Major* Vol. XXXI/2020, p.193.

90. Ministry of National Defense (of Taiwan), *Quadrennial Defense Review*, 2021, p.11, <https://www.ustaiwandefense.com/tcdswp/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/2021-Taiwan-Quadrennial-Defense-Review-QDR.pdf>.

91. Luis Simón, 'Between Punishment and Denial: Uncertainty, Flexibility, and U.S. Military Strategy toward China', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 2020, 41:3, 361-384.

Japan.<sup>92</sup> The 2015 national security legislation and new defence guidelines have further bolstered Japan's commitment to assist its ally, especially when its own security is deemed at risk. US-Japan military exercises are sometimes implicitly aimed at Taiwan, as evidenced by the deployment of amphibious forces.<sup>93</sup> In the authors' view, Japan's military contribution to a Taiwan crisis scenario will depend on the situation. If there is no attack on Japanese soil or citizens, Tokyo may limit its contribution to «rear-area support» towards US troops – including supply, maintenance, transportation, and medical aid. Washington may also expect Tokyo to provide intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance in the surrounding area as part of rear-area support.<sup>94</sup> If Japan's territory was directly threatened, Japan's defence forces will need to prepare for combat through defence mobilization.

Diplomacy-wise, for the first time since Japan's normalisation of diplomatic relations with China in 1972, in 2021 various Japanese summit statements mentioned Taiwan – albeit in the afore-mentioned formula (i.e. «peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait»), rather than directly supporting Taiwan. The Biden government actively encouraged this, but Japan was clearly willing to acquiesce to Washington. In fact, the wording appeared in statements issued jointly with the United States, including the March 16 US-Japan 2+2 meeting, the April 16 US-Japan summit, the June 11-13 G7 Summit. Also, Taiwan was discussed during the August 12 meeting among Quad officials.<sup>95</sup> In addition the wording appeared in joint statements following the EU-Japan summit and the Australia-Japan 2+2,<sup>96</sup> showing that Tokyo was also proactive in driving this process.

Tokyo also actively supported Taiwan's presence in multilateral bodies, such as the World Health Organization.<sup>97</sup> At Tokyo's initiative, US-Ja-

92. Axel Berkofsky, 'The US-Japan Security Alliance: Ready and Equipped to Deal with China?', *EUI Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies Policy Paper*, 2022/01, <https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/74103>.

93. 'Japan Self-Defense Force Conducts Large-Scale Joint Exercise', *Naval News*, 27 November 2021.

94. Jeffrey Hornung, 'What the United States Wants from Japan in Taiwan', *Foreign Policy*, 10 May 2021.

95. Concerning the Japan-US official pronouncements, please see above; *G7 Leaders' Statement*, 24 March 2022, [https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/joint\\_statement.pdf](https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/joint_statement.pdf); 'U.S., Japan, other Quad Members Discuss Taiwan's «Peace and Security»', *Kyodo News*, 13 August 2021.

96. 'Joint Statement - EU-Japan Summit, 27 May 2021', 27 May 2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/49922/eu-japan-summit-may-2021-statement.pdf>; Minister for Foreign Affairs, *Ninth Japan-Australia 2+2 Foreign and Defence Ministerial Consultations*, 9 June 2021.

97. Ryan Ashley, *Japan's Revolution in Taiwan Affairs*, War on the Rocks, 23 November 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/11/japans-revolution-on-taiwan-affairs/>.

pan-Taiwan lawmakers held a trilateral dialogue in July 2021.<sup>98</sup> Japan had also previously become a permanent member of the US-Taiwan Global Cooperation and Training Framework, a platform that aims to expand Taiwan's engagement with the world through functional cooperation.<sup>99</sup> The Japanese and US governments also coordinated donations of COVID-19 vaccines to Taiwan. Japan donated the highest number of vaccine doses to Taiwan – a total of about 4.2 million doses as of October 2021 – with the United States in second position.<sup>100</sup> The first batch of AstraZeneca vaccines donated by Japan were escorted by a US military aircraft.<sup>101</sup>

Beijing and Taipei's official filing for membership in the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) in 2021 also elicited open support for Taiwan's candidacy among Japanese cabinet members.<sup>102</sup> This was seemingly low-hanging fruit for further developing Taiwan-Japan links while potentially bolstering Japan's quest to secure supplies of high-end semiconductors and other supply chains in advanced technology. CPTPP membership application was underpinned by progress in Taiwan-US negotiations and the EU's announcement of negotiations aimed at a trade and investment agreement with Taiwan.<sup>103</sup> Furthermore, the world's largest chipmaker, Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co., announced that it would build the company's first-ever semiconductor fabrication factory in Japan in ostensible support of Japan's economic security agenda.<sup>104</sup> Nevertheless, in order to promote its ties with Japan, the Taiwanese government will need to overturn a ban on agricultural produce from five prefectures around (and including) Fukushima that was imposed after the Fukushima

98. 'Taiwan, US, Japan Lawmakers Participate in First Trilateral Strategy Forum', *Taiwan Today*, 30 July 2021.

99. Aurelio Insisa, *The Strategic Communications of Techno-democratic Statecraft: the Case of Taiwan*, Policy Briefs, 2021/25, Global Governance Programme, EU-Asia Project, [Europe in the World] - <https://hdl.handle.net/1814/71756>; Antoine Bondaz, *Strengthening Economic Cooperation while Defending the Status Quo: the Deepening of Relations between Europe and Taiwan*, Policy Briefs, 2022/07, Global Governance Programme, EU-Asia Project, Europe in the World - <https://hdl.handle.net/1814/73605>.

100. 'Japan Pledges Donation of more COVID-19 Vaccines to Taiwan', *Focus Taiwan*, 26 October 2021, <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202110260007>.

101. Rira Momma, '日米から台湾へコロナワクチン追加提供' (Additional Batches of Coronavirus Vaccines Offered by the US and Japan to Taiwan), 東亜 (Tōa), August 2021, Vol.8, pp.36-43.

102. 'Pacific Trade Pact Row Between Beijing and Taipei a Dilemma for Members', *South China Morning Post*, 24 September 2021.

103. European Parliament, *EU-Taiwan relations: MEPs push for stronger partnership*, 21 October 2021, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20211104IPR14926/eu-taiwan-relations-meps-push-for-stronger-partnership>.

104. Cheng Ting-Fang and Lauly Li, 'TSMC Announces Plans to Build First Chip Plant in Japan', *Nikkei Asia*, 14 October 2021.

nuclear disaster in 2011.<sup>105</sup> China's 2021 bid for accession to the CPTPP aimed to dent Taiwan's application by creating more complicated decisions for the current members. China's move was likely also aimed at thwarting Taiwan's bid even without joining, since it can bribe/intimidate one of the weaker CPTPP members.

The idea that Japan would be involved in a Taiwan-related crisis seemed to become more widely accepted among elites in Tokyo in 2021, although public debate did not develop to elucidate the nature of Japan's support in the event of a US-China military confrontation. Indeed, the LDP lower house election manifesto avoided mentioning Taiwan's defence, although it identified Taiwan as sharing universal values with Japan and supported its entry into the CPTPP and WHO as an observer. This was one of the foreign policy issues that all four candidates agreed upon during the LDP leadership contest.<sup>106</sup> Increased public debate and publicity – by former security officials and prominent members of the political class – seem aimed at preparing public opinion for potentially costly decisions in the future.<sup>107</sup> However, scepticism towards military intervention will continue to constrain Tokyo's options in coercive diplomacy and deterrence. Nevertheless, Japanese public opinion is also increasingly sympathetic to Taiwan. This was on display after China blocked Taiwanese pineapple imports in March; the island's pineapple exports to Japan rose eightfold as Japanese consumers bought «freedom pineapples» to express their support.<sup>108</sup>

Japan is likely to expand its policy engagement vis-à-vis Taiwan in the foreseeable future in multiple domains. The developments around Japan's «revolution» in its Taiwan policy confirms this article's emphasis on the relative continuity with the Abe administration's foreign and security policy.<sup>109</sup> In fact, political personalities in and behind the Japanese government, especially Defence Minister Kishi and former Prime Minister Abe, have weighed heavily in favour of a more proactive Taiwan policy.<sup>110</sup>

105. 'Taiwan Must Deal with Japan Food Import Ban after Applying to Join CPTPP: Minister', *Focus Taiwan*, 23 September 2021, <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202109230005>.

106. '尖閣警備へ海保能力強化 河野・岸田・高市氏が表明—自民総裁選' (LDP Presidential Election: Kōno, Kishida, and Takaichi Announce Need to Reinforce Coast Guard Capabilities for Senkaku's Security), *Jiji Tsūshin*, 24 September 2021.

107. See, for instance, the writings by former Assistant Chief Cabinet Secretary to Abe, Kanehara Nobukatsu: 'Deterring a War in the Taiwan Strait: A Bigger Security Role for Japan is Key', *Nippon.com*, 2 June 2021; 'Security Agenda for the Kishida Cabinet: Building a Credible Deterrent Capability', *Nippon.com*, 8 December 2021.

108. 'Pineapple Ban Flops as Japan Steps Up', *Taipei Times*, 7 August 2021.

109. Ryan Ashley, *Japan's Revolution in Taiwan Affairs*.

110. Interview with Japanese policy-maker, 29 October 2021.

9. *Kishida's China Policy*<sup>111</sup>

In the year under review China passed new maritime laws that potentially exacerbated tensions: the Maritime Safety Law and Coast Guard Law included loose definitions of the use of force and allowed Chinese constabulary forces to more aggressively go after the fishing boats of other states.<sup>112</sup> Moreover, China's ability to use its white hulls, if not fishing boats, for coercive and paramilitary purposes in the East and South China Seas was evident and made possible by the progressive militarization of its maritime infrastructure for strategic purposes.<sup>113</sup> Confronted by China's new round of potentially coercive «lawfare», the Japanese government extracted strong language in the above-mentioned statements with US and Western counterparts. Nevertheless, there initially appeared to be a possibility that a more constructive Japan-China relationship could be forged when Kishida became leader after Suga had effectively delegated foreign and security policy to Abe and allies during his tenure.

After all, Kishida Fumio traditionally associated himself with a more moderate line on foreign and security policy towards China. He retained factional leadership of the LDP's moderate *Kōchikai* faction, which traditionally prioritized bread-and-butter issues and socio-economic redistribution above nationalism and neo-liberal economics. This faction dominated the LDP during the Cold War, but 30 years have elapsed since Miyazawa Ki-ichi, the last *Kōchikai* prime minister. The *Kōchikai* promoted dialogue with Japan's Asian neighbours, light re-armament and an implicit acceptance of Japan's middle-power status, in contrast with the rival *Seiwakai* faction's emphasis on deterrence, recovering Japan's status as great power and distrust of the communist bloc, especially China. Kishida had even previously explicitly distinguished himself from Abe by saying he emphasised diplomacy over deterrence toward Asian neighbours.<sup>114</sup> Kishida, however, lacks political backchannels to handle bilateral relations, unlike some prominent LDP and cabinet members during the Abe and Suga governments. Kishida played a major role in isolating the former secretary general of the LDP,

111. Portions of this chapter and of the following one are reprinted with permission from Oxford Analytica based on Giulio Pugliese's analysis: 'Japan's Kishida has Limited Scope to Reset China Ties', *Oxford Analytica*, 29 October 2021.

112. Nguyen Thanh Trung and Le Ngoc Khanh Ngann, 'Codifying Waters and Reshaping Orders: China's Strategy for Dominating the South China Sea', *AMTI Update*, 27 September 2021, <https://amti.csis.org/codifying-waters-and-reshaping-orders-chinas-strategy-for-dominating-the-south-china-sea/>.

113. Chisako T. Masuo, 'China's «National Spatial Infrastructure» and Global Governance: Chinese Way of Military-Civil Fusion (MCF) over the Ocean', *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India*, 2021, 17:2, pp. 27-42.

114. Tobias Harris, 'Fumio Kishida's Principles Are About to Be Put to the Test', *Foreign Policy*, 4 October 2021.

Nikai Toshihiro, who played a central role in stabilizing Sino-Japanese relations under both Abe and Suga.

Kishida's speeches have nevertheless struck a firm yet constructive tone on China-Japan relations. When Fumio Kishida became Japan's prime minister on 4 October, Chinese President Xi Jinping sent a congratulatory message calling for the two countries to «strengthen dialogue and communication and enhance mutual trust and cooperation».<sup>115</sup> Publicity accorded by Chinese state media to Kishida's phone call with Xi on October 8 suggests that China is willing to engage Japan, even if just tactically, to relieve US pressure, and explore Kishida's dovish inclinations. When Kishida's initial secretary general, Amari Akira – an ally of Abe's – spectacularly failed to win his constituency seat during the 2021 general elections, Kishida moved Motegi Toshimitsu from the charge of foreign minister to that of secretary general, promoting the relatively liberal Hayashi Yoshimasa to the role of foreign minister.<sup>116</sup> Until his appointment, Hayashi, like his father before him, served as chairman of the Japan-China Friendship Parliamentarians Federation, a cross-party group that promotes good relations with Beijing.

Kishida will nevertheless need to echo the work of the most influential prime minister of the post-Cold War period, Abe Shinzō, be careful in policy statements, and be pragmatic in his appointments. After incurring the wrath of the conservative wing of the party for appointing Hayashi,<sup>117</sup> Kishida moved quickly by appointing Nakatani Gen to a newly established role as special advisor to the prime minister on human rights—with a particular focus on Chinese abuses.<sup>118</sup> As noted, Kishida has also moved closer to positions more openly favourable towards Taiwan, strengthening Japan's military capabilities, and pursuing a more vigorous defence of human rights. A worsening security environment, US expectations, and the continued weight of hawkish factions within the ruling party continue to pull Japan towards emphasising deterrence and a harder line on diplomacy. The new cabinet's composition and Kishida's own statements point to continuity in policy towards Beijing—responding to the long-term economic and military threats China poses, while cautiously avoiding immediate provocation. Tokyo thus continued moving on the security front in broad continuity with previous governments throughout 2021. While Kishida's personality and approach arguably provide an opportunity for stabilizing Japan's relations with South Korea or even China (albeit on a superficial level), Japan

115. 'Kishida and Xi agree to seek stable ties in first phone call', *Nikkei Asia*, 8 October 2021.

116. 'China-Friendly Lawmaker Appointed Japan Foreign Minister', *Bloomberg*, 10 November 2021.

117. Hiroyuki Akiyama, 'Kishida's Foreign Minister Pick Rankles Kingmakers Abe and Aso', *Nikkei Asia*, 11 November 2021.

118. 'Nakatani Named as Kishida's Special Adviser on Human Rights', *Asahi Shinbun*, 8 November 2021.

continued to counterbalance Chinese influence with its main regional partners. Ultimately, it is very likely that the Chinese government will be disappointed by Kishida's ultimate stance.<sup>119</sup>

### 10. *Japan's Security Policy Debate in 2021*

The aforementioned LDP leadership elections portended a stiffening of security policy across the board in response to perceived Chinese aggressiveness over Taiwan and in the East and South China Seas. Kōno Tarō, Takaichi Sanae, and Kishida Fumio all positioned themselves as hawkish on national defence during the campaign.<sup>120</sup> Only the distant fourth-placed candidate Noda Seiko pushed back against the need to toughen Japan's security posture.<sup>121</sup> The leadership race focused on a wide range of topics, including hitherto avoided subjects like the positioning of American intermediate range missiles in Japanese territory, overseas strike capabilities, substantive increases in defence spending, and the defence of Taiwan.<sup>122</sup> The rhetoric and focus on China in the LDP race certainly did not escape the attention of the Chinese government. Chinese government spokesperson Zhao Lijian decried the «senseless political hype-up» of China by the candidates.<sup>123</sup> The *Global Times* later noted the «unprecedented» and «intense wave of hard-line rhetoric» that resembled «an anti-China propaganda campaign».<sup>124</sup>

Prime Minister Kishida announced in his first speech to parliament after victory that his government would begin on revising Japan's three key national security documents to reflect new party positions: the National Security Strategy (NSS), the Mid-Term Defense Plan (MTDP), and the National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG). The MTDP identifies the basic number and type of units to be procured over the next five years and

119. Laura Zhou, 'China 'Willing to Work' with Next Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, but Watches Cautiously to See if Dove Will Turn Hawkish', *South China Morning Post*, 29 September 2021; 'Kishida to be Next Japanese PM, May Not Keep Extreme Rhetoric on China Policy «for the Good of Both», *Global Times*, 29 September 2021.

120. Corey Wallace, 'Three Hawks and a Dove: Defence Issues and the 2021 LDP Election', *9Dashline*, 27 October 2021, <https://www.9dashline.com/article/three-hawks-and-a-dove-defence-issues-and-the-2021-ldp-election>; 'Japan and Foreign Territory Strike: Debate, Deterrence, and Defense Strength', *Journal Of Global Strategic Studies*, 2021, 1:2, pp.30-77.

121. 'Editorial: LDP Candidates Need Balanced Approaches on Foreign Policy', *Asahi Shinbun*, 21 September 2021.

122. Wallace, 'Three Hawks and a Dove'.

123. 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on September 14, 2021', *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, 14 September 2021, <https://archive.ph/o4LP4>.

124. 'It is Hoped Kishida Won't Push China-Japan Relations toward Hostility: Global Times Editorial', *Global Times*, 29 September 2021.



gives a 5-year indication of defence budget. Kishida decided to revise this document one year earlier than usual. The government will also review the NDPG, which explains the significance of acquisition of units, technology, force structure and military posture to Japan's ultimate security goals over the next 5-10 years. This document had only been revised twice until 2010, but the one envisaged by the Kishida government will be the fourth since then, showing the pace of change in Japan's regional security environment and its impact upon Japanese defence thinkers. Finally, the NSS is a statement that describes the regional environment and its relationship to Japan's national interests and objectives, and the higher-level strategic approaches and principles Japan will adopt in its foreign and defence policies to secure its interests. It is expected that the strategy will place significant focus on Japan's economic security vis-à-vis the PRC, and will also consider new options for deterrence, including overseas strike, and alliance cooperation in response to the rapid pace of regional military developments. This will be the first NSS revision since December 2013 when the strategy was promulgated. As the logic of the MTDP and NDPG flows from the National Security Strategy, the National Security Secretariat will need to work together with both the LDP defence committees and foreign and defence ministries to formulate these documents as well as consult with academics and policy thinkers in other industries. Consultation and sensitivity towards Komeito, who Kishida will need to lean on in order to succeed in the House of Councillors election in mid-2022, is also required. Therefore, it is anticipated that these deliberations will not be finished until the end of 2022.

In October, the LDP produced its House of Representatives election manifesto that echoed the hawkish overtones of September's leadership contest. Under Kishida, the LDP promised a «major strengthening» of Japan's defence capabilities from 2022 onwards. The manifesto also indirectly noted the need to revisit a foreign territory strike option, which Kishida reaffirmed as prime minister.<sup>125</sup> It also promised to enhance the Japan Coast Guard and its ability to cooperate with Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF) in light of concerns over China's recent maritime police legislation, and its provisions on the use of weapons.<sup>126</sup> The manifesto's reference to the NATO 2% to GDP defence spending target also garnered significant media attention.<sup>127</sup>

125. Corey Wallace, 'The Future of Japan's Defense is More Complicated Than it Looks', *Tokyo Review*, 14 September 2020, <https://www.tokyoreview.net/2020/09/the-future-of-japans-defense-is-more-complicated-than-it-looks/>.

126. Saitō Katsuhisa, 'The Senkaku Confrontation: Japan's Coast Guard Faces Chinese «Patrol Ships»', *Nippon.com*, 26 April 2021, <https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/d00698/>.

127. Tim Kelly and Ju-min Park, 'With an Eye on China, Japan's Ruling Party Makes Unprecedented Defence Spending Pledge', *Reuters*, 31 October 2021; Kosuke Takahashi and Gabriel Dominguez, 'Japan's LDP Vows to Double Defence Spending Amid «Increasingly Severe Security Environments»', *Janes*, 18 October 2021.

The LDP's ultimately comfortable victory in the 2021 House of Representatives election raises the prospect that Kishida, contrary to his dovish reputation, will adopt bolder defence and foreign policies in the years to come, in line with Abe and his allies' preferences. Indeed, Kishida appears to have undergone something of a conversion on national security issues over the last decade due first and foremost to first-hand exposure to Chinese and North Korean behaviour as foreign minister, but also for more opportunistic reasons related to political ambition. Throughout 2021, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida downplayed his reputation as a defence dove. Even before indicating that he would run in the leadership race he had described attacks on foreign bases as a potent option for Japan, had adopted much stronger language on China than he had in previous years, and had even raised the possibility of Japan providing assistance to Taiwan during a contingency.<sup>128</sup> Kishida recited the mantra that he would not be bound by Japan's informal 1% per cent of GDP defence spending marker and indicated his openness to revising Article 9 of Japan's constitution to constitutionalize the existence of Japan's SDF.<sup>129</sup>

During the LDP leadership contest Kishida even demurred on the installation of intermediate-range missiles, which may be co-developed with the United States following Washington's withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019. When asked whether Japan should host American intermediate-range missiles, only Takaichi (who ended up third in the leadership contest) responded affirmatively, saying that such an arrangement would be «absolutely necessary to protect the lives and territory of the Japanese people». Kishida Fumio nevertheless said he would not «outright oppose» a deployment but joined runner-up Kōno Tarō in avoiding a definitive answer, citing the lack of a specific proposal from the United States.<sup>130</sup> Nevertheless, it is remarkable that the issue was mentioned at all. Such a deployment could further exacerbate tensions sur-

128. 自民・岸田前政調会長、台湾有事の存立危機事態「安保法守るのは当然」米艦防護など念頭 (Former LDP Policy Chief Kishida Says it «Would be Natural» for Japan to Apply Security Legislation, Protect US Ships, During Existential Crisis over Taiwan), *Sankei Shinbun*, 6 April 2021; Daisuke Akimoto, 'The Arrival of Kishida Diplomacy?', *The Diplomat*, 7 September 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/the-arrival-of-kishida-diplomacy/>; Elli-Katharina Pohlkamp, 'Tough Dove: Japan's China Policy under its Next Leader', *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 1 October 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/article/tough-dove-japans-china-policy-under-its-next-leader/>; Ryo Nemoto, 'Countering China is Top Priority for Japan PM Contender Kishida', *Nikkei Asia*, 4 September 2021; Tobias Harris, 'Fumio Kishida is Unlikely to Break with Shinzo Abe's Legacy', *Nikkei Asia*, 30 September 2021.

129. Yora Masao, 'Kishida's Farsighted Plan'.

130. 米[中距離ミサイル]の日本配備、高市氏「必要」 総裁選4候補でただ1人 (LDP Presidential Race: Takaichi Only One of Four Candidates to Support Deployment of «Necessary» U.S. Intermediate-range Missiles in Japan), *FNN News*, 19 September 2021, <https://www.fnn.jp/articles/-/241470>.

rounding the concentration of American military forces in Okinawa. While other locations could be considered as part of flexible basing arrangements, recent local controversies surrounding the failed deployment of the «defensive» Aegis Ashore system in Akita and Yamaguchi Prefectures points to the US military presence in Okinawa remaining an uncomfortable issue for Japan's leaders.

However, the regional military balance for the US-Japan alliance continues to deteriorate, and it seems only a matter of time before this issue is raised again.<sup>131</sup> Over the last decade, China has accelerated the deployment of numerous, cost-effective, mobile, and difficult to intercept land-based intermediate-range ballistic missiles that could greatly hinder the US military's ability to operate from bases throughout the Western Pacific. US military planners have identified Japan, and particularly Okinawa, as ideal locations for future land-based missile deployments. They have anticipated that this would restore regional balance and enhance deterrence by undermining Chinese confidence that the PLA could operate its air and naval forces freely in the East China Sea and around Taiwan simply by neutralising regional American bases at the onset of a conflict. Indeed, China has explicitly warned Japan and others against hosting American intermediate-range missiles under development following the United States' 2019 withdrawal from the INF Treaty.<sup>132</sup>

Kishida's increasingly muscular security stances also reflect toughening attitudes towards China within Japan's political elites and public opinion throughout the spectrum.<sup>133</sup> Kishida's sudden shift in tone ahead of the LDP presidential election was also likely aimed at appeasing the LDP's powerful hawkish wing and, arguably, US expectations for greater contributions to the alliance in response to strategic competition with China.<sup>134</sup> After becoming prime minister, Kishida did announce a significant injection of funds into the defence portfolio as of 774 billion yen (US\$6.8 billion); it was the largest ever supplementary budget provided to defence and an effective 5.8% year-on-year increase.<sup>135</sup> Kishida also communicated a commitment to an increase in Host Nation Support for United States Forces in Japan.<sup>136</sup>

131. Corey Wallace, 'Three Hawks and a Dove'.

132. *Ibid.*

133. Jesse Johnson, 'LDP Contenders Put China in the Crosshairs to Win Votes', *Japan Times*, 20 September 2021.

134. Yora Masao, 'Kishida's Farsighted Plan'; Corey Wallace, 'Kishida's Opportunity to Shake Up Japanese Defence Policy', *East Asia Forum*, 11 November 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/11/11/kishidas-opportunity-to-shake-up-japanese-defence-policy/>.

135. '防衛力強化加速パッケージ' (Accelerated Defence Strengthening Package), *Ministry of Defense of Japan*, November 2021, [https://www.mod.go.jp/j/yosan/yosan\\_gaiyo/2021/yosan\\_20211126.pdf](https://www.mod.go.jp/j/yosan/yosan_gaiyo/2021/yosan_20211126.pdf).

136. 'Japan Increases U.S. Forces Support to \$9.2 billion over 5 Years', *Nikkei Asia*, 21 December 2021.

The question remains as to what extent Kishida's is willing to expend political capital to pursue meaningful security reforms. While forgotten during the LDP race, the «peace-loving» Komeito remains the LDP's coalition partner.<sup>137</sup> Kishida's family history and constituency in Hiroshima also coincide with his self-representation as a pacifist with an emphasis on non-proliferation and, possibly, banning nuclear weapons. In his 2020 manifesto book and public statements he signalled his support for Japan's subscription to the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).<sup>138</sup> The Kishida government is therefore likely to be passive on AUKUS. Kishida has avowed a preference for nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation and was more cautious than other LDP leadership contenders on the need for nuclear-powered submarines.

While Kishida's fiscal injection into defence is notable, it was part of a pandemic-specific supplementary budget which may not be forthcoming every year. Furthermore, over 60% of this supplementary funding was for «advance payments» to support Japan's defence companies. These companies had suffered from the delayed fulfilment of contracts by the Japanese government as Tokyo purchased higher-end aerial platforms from the United States through the Foreign Military Sales programme over the last decade, despite the weak yen.<sup>139</sup> The «pledges» of the LDP's manifesto in favour of an increase of military spending to 2% of GDP may also have been aimed at appeasing Abe while *de facto* deferring the matter to the future: wording in the actual manifesto was not as straightforward as suggested in the press.<sup>140</sup> There is also the minor matter of plausibility: even assuming annual economic growth of 2%, Japan would have to sustain year-on-year increases of 9.5% for 10 years, or 7% for 15 years to meet this target. Even reaching the halfway point of 1.5% of GDP would require defence outlays between 5% and 6% per annum.

137. John Nilsson-Wright, 'Japan's Kishida: A Dove in Hawk's Clothing?', *The Diplomat*, 7 October 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/japans-kishida-a-dove-in-hawks-clothing/>. Shogo Suzuki and Corey Wallace, 'Explaining Japan's Response to Geopolitical Vulnerability', *International Affairs*, 2018, 94:4, pp.711-734.

138. Kishida Fumio, 核兵器のない世界へ 勇気ある平和国家の志 (Towards a World with No Nuclear Weapons: The Ambition of Creating a Peaceful Nation-state), Tokyo: Nikkei BP, 2020.

139. '防衛力強化加速パッケージ', *Ministry of Defense of Japan*

140. 'Ruling LDP's Election Manifesto at Odds with Kishida's Campaign Commitments', *Japan Times*, 13 October 2021; 'Japan's Ruling Party Unveils Manifesto with Focus on Coronavirus, Defence', *Reuters*, 12 October 2021; '2021年政権公約- 総合政策集', pp.1-14.

## 11. Conclusion

Kishida may not only have greater longevity than expected, but he may also be more transformational in the constitutional and defence matters. Precisely because of his dovish reputation, Kishida has more leeway to make changes in those areas since public opinion trusts him not to exaggerate threats in the service of his own nationalism. Kishida's non-revisionism might help push through changes Abe himself failed to make due to the antipathy that his politics engender among many in Japan,<sup>141</sup> something that Abe himself appears to recognize.<sup>142</sup> Kishida has consistently shown a pragmatic streak and reinvented himself on security, compromising not only on defence but on the Kōchikai's traditionally pragmatic «Asia-centred» diplomacy. Kishida even emphasised human rights and liberal values, specifically with reference to Chinese repression in Hong Kong and Xinjiang and China's behaviour towards Taiwan, and even communicated his concerns directly to Xi Jinping in a call between the two leaders.

The same pragmatism that saw Kishida become post-war Japan's longest-serving foreign minister, acting under then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and in line with his proactive foreign and security policy, has already paid dividends. Kishida emerged triumphant from the 2021 House of Representatives election in a stronger position than even his backers may have anticipated. November and December saw his ratings go up after the election, and he began the new year in the rare situation of having improved on his initial cabinet ratings three months after taking office.<sup>143</sup> Unlike his predecessors, he has managed to keep a consistently positive net rating in COVID-19 evaluations.<sup>144</sup> Rather than the latest one-year revolving door prime minister, Kishida – if he is able to take this positive momentum up to the mid-2022 House of Councillors election, building on COVID-19 recovery – will not have to face another national election for three more years.

Nevertheless, for 2021, the minimal losses incurred by the LDP at the October 2021 general elections, the Suga and Kishida administrations' composition, and their domestic and international initiatives, suggest that continuity with past government practices remained the norm during the year under review.

141. Suzuki and Wallace, 'Explaining Japan's Response'.

142. Yora Masao, 'Kishida's Far Sighted Plan'.

143. 'RPJ世論調査', *Real Politics Japan*.

144. 'Evaluation of Japanese Government COVID-19 Response', *Sigma I*.

