

# Japan's Election Foibles Undermine Its Security Role in the Indo–Pacific

*Bruce Klingner*

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

New Japanese Prime Minister Ishiba must handle a minority government, weak party unity, competing interests amongst coalition partners, and an emboldened opposition.

Uncertainty now exists over Tokyo's ability to double defense spending, create counter-strike capabilities against North Korea, and play a larger role in the region.

The U.S. and Japan must operationalize their new command structures and enhance bilateral discussions on nuclear strategy and policy planning.

After three elections in as many months, Shigeru Ishiba finally became Japan's undisputed but diminished prime minister, replacing Fumio Kishida. Their party, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), had hoped that selecting a new leader in September 2024 would enable it to turn the page on corruption scandals and regain electorate support before the 2025 upper house election, expected by July. Ishiba's surprising call for a snap general election in October backfired spectacularly. He had assumed that he would gain a popular mandate to push back against internal party challengers. Instead, the voters punished the LDP for its lackluster efforts at reform and the ruling coalition lost its majority in the legislature for the first time in 15 years.

In November, Ishiba—a former minister of defense and a former minister of agriculture, forestry, and fisheries—persevered through a third election in a runoff

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <https://report.heritage.org/bg3887>

The Heritage Foundation | 214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE | Washington, DC 20002 | (202) 546-4400 | [heritage.org](https://heritage.org)

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

against the opposition leader to finally emerge victorious, though severely weakened. He dodged calls to resign to assume responsibility for the LDP's dismal election results, but his tenure in office remains uncertain. The sword of Damocles of impending dismissal continues to hover over his head.

Ishiba must navigate a fragile minority government through the rocks and shoals of weak party unity, competing interests amongst potential coalition partners, and an emboldened opposition. He will need to parlay with non-aligned parties on an issue-by-issue basis to gain sufficient votes to pass legislation.

Ishiba pledged to maintain the LDP's strong security policies, such as the importance of the Japanese–U.S. alliance and its need to confront China. Yet, while the Japanese ship of state will remain on the same course, the sails are luffing and progress has stalled. Under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his successors, Japan had become a bold and decisive security partner to the United States and like-minded democracies in the Indo–Pacific.

Uncertainty now exists over Tokyo's ability to deliver on promises of doubling the nation's defense spending, developing counter-strike capabilities against the growing North Korean nuclear and missile threats, and assuming a larger security role in the Indo–Pacific, including Taiwan contingencies.

Some of Ishiba's initial security and foreign policy proposals raised eyebrows and concerns amongst Japanese and U.S. alliance managers. His advocacy of revising the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with Washington, creating an Asian North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and discussing a nuclear-sharing arrangement with the U.S. are out of touch with mainstream thinking, including in the LDP. Japanese officials privately speculated that, despite being a defense expert, Ishiba's views are based on outdated precepts and will likely change as he is briefed on current circumstances.

Ishiba and the LDP will need to prioritize responding to a disgruntled electorate focused on a stagnant economy and income disparity while concurrently addressing a deteriorating Indo–Pacific security environment and uncertainty over the viability of its relations with security partners.

As a new U.S. Administration looks to combat the rising and varied Chinese threat to the region, Washington will be searching for reliable allies and partners and weighing their contributions. Until recently, Japan was a stalwart and dependable ally, leading the charge on the need to push back against Chinese regional encroachment and deter Beijing military action against Taiwan. Ishiba's stumbling out of the blocks could not have come at a worse time for Japan, the United States, and stability in the Indo–Pacific.

## A Tale of Three Elections

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida decided not to run for re-election in September 2024 as the president of the ruling LDP due to his low public approval rating, public disaffection with the LDP's inability to improve the stagnant economy, and public anger at widespread political funding scandals amongst party lawmakers.

In December 2023 it was revealed that dozens of LDP lawmakers and officials had been pocketing cash from party fundraising events. Despite Kishida's efforts to address the scandal, the public remained harshly critical of the party and Kishida's handling of the scandal, though he had not been implicated.

Kishida and LDP leaders felt the need for a fresh face at the top to rekindle support for the party prior to the 2025 upper house legislative elections. Nine Japanese lawmakers declared their candidacy to replace Kishida as LDP party president, which, under Japan's parliamentary system, chooses the country's prime minister since its coalition has a majority in the national legislature. Kishida's successor would not be elected by Japan's populace but by a limited number of LDP lawmakers and selected party representatives.

After coming in second in the first round of voting, Ishiba defeated the frontrunner, Minister for Economic Security Sanae Takaichi, in the follow-up round of voting to become prime minister in his fifth attempt at the office. He had long been the most popular LDP politician amongst the populace and local party members though less liked by senior party leadership for his harsh criticism of Prime Minister Abe's policies and the party's weak handling of numerous corruption scandals.

Only days after becoming prime minister in late September, Ishiba surprised everyone by announcing that he would dissolve parliament and hastily scheduling a snap election for the lower house of parliament within a month, the quickest that any newly inaugurated prime minister had ever called for a general election.<sup>1</sup> Ishiba's strategy was to catch the opposition in disarray and capitalize on his strong public support to gain a mandate to push back against internal LDP faction resistance.

However, Ishiba's popularity plummeted shortly after his election announcement. The populace wanted the LDP to prioritize political reform and new economic policies rather than political machinations. His choices for cabinet ministers reflected continuity rather than the bold change from the past that the electorate sought. While most new Japanese leaders enjoyed a surge in popularity, Ishiba's approval ratings were only in the 40 percent range shortly before the lower house election.<sup>2</sup>

Ishiba's problems were exacerbated by his decision to allow some of the incumbent politicians tainted by the financial scandal to run in the election and even provide party funding to some of their local party branches. The electorate perceived the LDP as insufficiently punishing its corrupt politicians.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than articulating a comprehensive party platform of political and economic reform in the run-up to the election, Ishiba confused voters by flip-flopping on several economic and societal policies, as well as some of his long-standing signature security stances.<sup>4</sup>

## Ishiba's Own Goal—the Disastrous Snap Election

Ishiba's gamble to call for a quick general election failed dramatically. The LDP coalition had been expected to lose a few seats in the Diet but instead suffered a devastating defeat, losing its legislative majority for the first time in 15 years. Rather than supporting the popular Ishiba, the voters punished the ruling coalition.

The LDP coalition dropped from 295 seats to 218. The leader of the LDP's coalition partner, Keiichi Ishii of the Komeito party, who had assumed his position only one month earlier, lost his seat in the lower house. The opposition parties went from 170 to 244 seats when the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP), the largest opposition party, increased its seats from 98 to 148.<sup>5</sup>

The election results were driven primarily by voter anger at the LDP corruption scandal and deep-seated frustration at the party's failure to improve the economy. The electorate voted against the LDP but not necessarily in favor of the policies of the CDP or other opposition parties.

Public support for Ishiba's administration dropped to 30 percent after the snap election while his disapproval rating rose from 32 percent to 51 percent. However, only 28.6 percent of respondents thought that Ishiba should resign, while 65.7 percent saw no need for him to step down.<sup>6</sup>

A ruling coalition in Japan needs 233 seats in the 465-seat lower house for a simple majority, but 261 seats to be able to control the legislative agenda, to chair legislative committees, and to have a majority of committee members. In order to have the same number of committee members as the opposition parties, the ruling coalition needs 244 seats.<sup>7</sup>

**November 11—the Third Election.** Having failed to win a majority in the October election, Ishiba had 30 days to win over potential coalition partners to reach the 233-seat threshold, otherwise a special session of the Diet would be convened to choose a new prime minister. Potential partners, however, were reluctant to join the LDP. The largest opposition party, the

CDP, also failed to gain coalition partners to win a majority. That led to a November 11 showdown between Ishiba and CDP leader Yoshihiko Noda in an election voted on by lawmakers in both houses of the Diet. Ishiba finally won in the second round, though without gaining any votes from non-coalition members.

**Dead Man Walking?** Had he lost that vote, Ishiba would have become Japan's shortest-serving postwar premier. For now, Ishiba will remain in power, having avoided calls for his resignation or being replaced by an LDP challenger. Given its drubbing in the general election, the LDP was wary of another near-term leadership change and there were no obvious replacements that would be more popular with the public.

The far-right faction of the LDP was weakened by the October election results. Although Sanae Takaichi had won the first round of voting in the internal LDP election in September, she was seen by party members as too divisive to represent the party in a general election. Moreover, her support came primarily from the LDP's far-right factions which lost a large number of seats in the general election due to the Diet member having been closely linked to the corruption scandals.

Ishiba's influence was greatly diminished in only a few short weeks. His long-term fate remains in jeopardy and dependent on cleaning up the party's tarnished image by implementing political reform measures and redressing economic problems prior to this year's upper house election. A failure to turn around the party's travails could even drive non-aligned parties to join the opposition coalition.

However, Ishiba will be challenged in making progress by ruling over a minority government that cannot pass legislation without support from non-coalition partners on a case-by-case basis. This will give tremendous leverage to opposition parties who will come with demands in hand knowing they have the LDP over a barrel. Concessions that Ishiba is forced to make could further weaken his hold on power.

## **Ishiba's Security Policy: Continuity with a Side of Confusion**

Prime Minister Ishiba is a stalwart supporter of a strong military alliance with the United States and enhancing security, diplomatic, and economic cooperation with regional democracies to defend against the growing North Korean and China threats. He shares his predecessor's enthusiasm for enhancing relations with South Korea to overcome historical animosities and enabling alignment against common security challenges which were formalized in the historic August 2023 Camp David agreement.

Ishiba supports Japan's defense reforms, including doubling the country's defense spending and developing counter-strike capabilities. In December 2022 national security documents, Japan delineated extensive defense reforms to develop new military capabilities and bolster Japan's ability to assume greater responsibilities for its own defense and in the region. Recent initiatives by both Tokyo and Washington to improve their military command structures in Japan will enable stronger coordination between the two nations' military forces.

Japan's new national security team is well versed in foreign and military issues. Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya, Defense Minister Gen Nakatani, and Ishiba all previously served as defense minister. Iwaya had also served as senior vice foreign minister.

Yet, while the long-term prospects for the bilateral U.S.–Japanese security relationship remain strong, Ishiba has staked out positions that could put him at odds with the United States. He has called for a more independent Japanese role in the alliance and revisions to the SOFA. Ishiba's proposals for an Asian NATO and nuclear sharing with the United States have raised eyebrows if not concerns over his intentions.

Private discussions with Japanese officials and experts shortly after Ishiba's election indicated they were struggling to understand Ishiba's controversial policies. There was a strong consensus that, while Ishiba is a self-professed defense "geek,"<sup>8</sup> former minister of defense, and member of the Diet, his mindset is surprisingly outdated and he is likely unaware of recent developments. Ishiba misuses security terms that have very specific meanings, or he uses the terms in broader, metaphoric ways. There is speculation that some of his security ideas might reflect broad aspirations rather than specific policy proposals.

There is clearly a need to gain greater specificity of Ishiba's thinking on a number of security policies as well as to inform him of developments during the past decade, including changes to the surrounding security environment, the nature of the alliance with the United States, enhanced Japanese security capabilities, and networking efforts with regional partners.

His views may evolve after being briefed by officials and bureaucrats. Indeed, Ishiba and senior officials already seem to be walking back some of the contentious ideas or depicting them as long-term goals, such as revising the SOFA and creating an Asian NATO.

## Revising the Status of Forces Agreement

Ishiba supports the bilateral security alliance with the United States and the stationing of U.S. forces in Japan as a necessity for the defense of his

country. However, Ishiba chafes at what he describes as the “asymmetrical bilateral treaty,”<sup>9</sup> which leads Japan to not being a “truly independent country.”<sup>10</sup> A major source of his ire is the SOFA, which governs the manner in which U.S. forces operate in Japan and their jurisdiction under Japanese law, including some exemptions from local prosecution. Ishiba perceives that the U.S.–Japanese alliance is imbalanced, in part because of the agreement, and seeks to make Japan a more equal partner.

Ishiba’s advocacy of revising the SOFA is largely based on a decades-old incident on Okinawa when a U.S. military helicopter crashed into a university and the U.S. military did not allow the local police to investigate the crash site. In response to that and subsequent incidents, the U.S. and Japan made operational changes or created supplementary agreements to mitigate disputes, though not revising the SOFA itself.

Ishiba calls for Japanese authorities to have the right to enter U.S. bases, reduce the extra-territoriality of U.S. service members committing crimes, and have joint management of U.S. bases in Japan.<sup>11</sup> It would instead be preferable to implement additional refinements of practices or draft implementing documents to achieve greater alliance equity rather than formally revising the SOFA, which could require altering the bilateral defense treaty.

The prime minister also advocates revising the SOFA to enable Japanese forces to train in Guam or the continental United States given the dearth of domestic facilities for full-scale training. He argues that a SOFA revision would enhance alliance security by improving Japanese military capabilities, while not entailing any additional Japanese security obligations toward the United States. A far simpler solution would be to create a facilities Reciprocal Access Agreement, such as Japan signed with Australia, to allow each country’s forces to train in the other nation.

More broadly, Ishiba articulated a vision to elevate the U.S.–Japanese alliance to an “equal nation” status on par with the U.S.–U.K. alliance. In this way, he argues, Japan could secure its independence and “defend the liberal order jointly, shoulder-to-shoulder [and] actively contribute to the peace and stability of the Indo–Pacific.”<sup>12</sup> Yet Ishiba overlooks that the U.S.–U.K. special relationship is based on a mutual pledge to come to the military aid of the other if either nation is attacked. Currently, Japan does not have a reciprocal responsibility to defend the United States, only U.S. forces engaged in the defense of Japan. The defense treaty is asymmetrical—and in Japan’s favor.

After being inaugurated, Ishiba acknowledged that any revision would require lengthy negotiations with Washington. During his initial press conference as prime minister, he commented that he had called for revising the

agreement for 20 years but admitted that “I do not think that just because I have become Prime Minister, I will suddenly realize these issues [nor will it] change overnight.”<sup>13</sup>

## Creating an Asian NATO

Ishiba based his views on the necessity for an Asian version of NATO by citing Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent U.S. and NATO refusal to be directly involved in Ukraine’s defense which, he argues, negatively transformed the global security environment. Ishiba’s theory is that, under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, Ukraine had the right to exercise collective self-defense with other nations, and that should not be denied because Kyiv is not a NATO member.

He affirmed Prime Minister Kishida’s warning that “Ukraine today is Asia tomorrow.” As such, he warns that “the absence of a collective self-defense system like NATO in Asia means that wars are likely to break out because there is no obligation for mutual defense. Under these circumstances, the creation of an Asian version of NATO is essential to deter China by its Western allies.”<sup>14</sup>

Ishiba highlighted Tokyo’s strengthening of relations with South Korea and its quasi-alliance relationships with Australia, Canada, France, India, the Philippines, and the United Kingdom. In a leap of logic, Ishiba suggests that “if these alliances are upgraded, a hub-and-spoke system, with the Japan–US alliance at its core, will be established, and in the future, it will be possible to develop the alliance into an Asian version of NATO.”<sup>15</sup>

Yet, he does not comment on the strict constraints on Japanese use of military force, nor does he advocate removing those restrictions. He also refrains from defining whether his version of an Asian NATO would share the European NATO’s Article 5 in which an armed attack against any member is considered an attack against all, and consequently each member commits to respond, including through the use of armed force.<sup>16</sup>

Divergent priorities amongst Indo–Pacific nations, resistance by some countries to confront Beijing directly, and lingering historic issues would hinder if not preclude initiating expansive treaty commitments. Southeast Asian nations are particularly resistant even to appearances of taking sides in the U.S.–Chinese competition and even South Korea has been timid in its criticism of Beijing’s aggressive policies toward its neighbors. While there has been great progress in recent years in enhancing security coordination and cooperation amongst some Indo–Pacific nations, none of it would yet lend itself to new mutual defense treaties.



Ishiba's vision for an "Asian NATO" is less likely a proposal for creating a formal organization with mutual defense commitments than a call for expanding ongoing multilateral efforts of defense cooperation amongst Indo-Pacific nations against the growing China threat.

That said, the rising North Korean and Chinese threats and belligerent behavior have been a catalyst for greater security cooperation and coordination though not necessarily expansive defense integration. These efforts will continue. The latticework of minilaterals and multilaterals could evolve into something more formal but would require a long evolution period.

After assuming office, Ishiba acknowledged the difficulties in implementing his vision for an Asian NATO by commenting it "cannot be launched overnight."<sup>17</sup> In a phone call with President Joe Biden, Ishiba affirmed that he was committed to the "latticework of likeminded partners," using the Biden Administration terminology.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, in his inaugural press conference, Foreign Minister Iwaya was cautious. He commented that the new administration would first "weave together our network with like-minded countries and allies in a more multi-layered way.... We should consider this as part of our vision for the future over the medium to long term."<sup>19</sup>

Throwing more cold water on the idea, Iwaya emphasized that there had been no change in the constitutional interpretation in which Japan's "exercise of the right of collective self-defense for the sole purpose of defending other countries is not permitted."<sup>20</sup>

## Japanese Nuclear Sharing

Ishiba's most puzzling proposal was calling for a nuclear-sharing arrangement with the United States. In an article for the Hudson Institute prior to his election, he wrote that, as a result of the deteriorating security environment, the U.S. extended deterrence in the region will no longer function. He stated that an Asian version of NATO must "specifically consider America's sharing of nuclear weapons or the introduction of nuclear weapons into the region."<sup>21</sup>

Ishiba seems to not understand the definition and parameters of NATO's nuclear-sharing arrangement in which U.S. nuclear weapons are deployed in some NATO nations while remaining solely under U.S. custody and control. Several NATO nations provide dual-capable aircraft that could deliver U.S. nuclear weapons only after political approval is given by NATO's Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) and authorized by the U.S. President. The NPG enables consultation, collective decision-making, and political control over

all aspects of NATO's nuclear mission.<sup>22</sup> Conversely, NATO members cannot veto a U.S. President's decision to launch a nuclear attack.

Any advocacy of Japan hosting U.S. nuclear weapons or having Japanese pilots deliver U.S. nuclear weapons would run counter to Japan's long-standing nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation sentiment. Since 1967, Japan has maintained its Three Non-Nuclear Principles, pledging not to possess, produce, or permit the introduction of nuclear weapons<sup>23</sup> as a matter of government policy, though it is not enacted into law.

Japan frequently cites its status as the only country to have ever suffered atomic bombings as the basis of its strong anti-nuclear-weapons posture, though concurrently relying on the U.S. extended deterrence guarantee, which includes nuclear weapons. The majority of the public remains firmly opposed to Japan acquiring nuclear capabilities, including a NATO-style nuclear-sharing arrangement.<sup>24</sup> As such, his proposal is a non-starter. When former Prime Minister Abe proposed the idea of nuclear sharing after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it did not gain support and was quickly dismissed.

After Ishiba became prime minister, Foreign Minister Iwaya affirmed on October 2, 2024, that the Japanese government would firmly maintain the Three Non-Nuclear Principles as a policy guideline and had no intention of reconsidering the policy.<sup>25</sup> Tomiko Ichikawa, Japanese ambassador to the Conference on Disarmament, reaffirmed on October 21 that "Japan adheres to the three no nuclear principles" and "has no intention of revising the principles."<sup>26</sup>

Rather than a formal NATO-style nuclear-sharing arrangement, Ishiba may instead envision greater U.S.–Japanese discussions and information sharing on U.S. nuclear strategy, such as Washington and Seoul began with the Nuclear Consultative Group in 2023. Despite having previously been minister of defense, Ishiba seems unaware that Washington and Tokyo have been doing so since 2010 through the Extended Deterrence Dialogue (EDD).<sup>27</sup>

**Enhanced Japanese–South Korean Relations.** Seoul dodged a bullet when Ishiba was chosen instead of far-right nationalist candidate Sanae Takaichi who was unlikely to share Prime Minister Kishida's enthusiasm for improving relations with South Korea. She had vowed to continue visiting the controversial Yasakuni Shrine, which Koreans perceive as glorifying Japan's imperial past, including its brutal 1910 to 1945 occupation of the Korean Peninsula. When previous Japanese prime ministers visited or sent offerings to the shrine, it caused strains in bilateral relations with Seoul.

President Yoon Suk Yeol's bold and politically risky March 2022 initiative to defuse the contentious wartime forced-labor issue with Japan revived dormant bilateral relations and set the foundation for greater diplomatic, economic, and security cooperation. Washington was able to capitalize on the new environment to achieve greater trilateral collaboration, including resuming trilateral military exercises and initializing real-time exchange of North Korean missile launch information. Progress was formalized in the historic August 2023 Camp David agreements, which defined plans for even greater synergistic efforts.

South Koreans, including conservative and liberal media, welcomed news of Ishiba's election since he is perceived as having a greater willingness to address Japan's troubled past with South Korea. During private meetings, South Korean officials privately expressed confidence that Ishiba would not only maintain Kishida's enthusiasm for strengthening bilateral relations but might also be more forward leaning on acknowledging Japan's past of using Korean forced laborers during World War II.

However, Japanese officials privately cautioned that, despite personal sympathy, Ishiba will remain constrained in focusing on historic issues due to strong resistance by conservative LDP factions and the necessity to prioritize economic issues of concern to the electorate. Unrealistic expectations, they warned, could lead to South Korean disillusionment and Japanese resentment.<sup>28</sup>

Ishiba quickly sought to signal continued momentum for bilateral rapprochement with South Korea. In an unprecedented development, Yoon's congratulatory phone call to Ishiba was second after the customary initial phone call from the U.S. President. Similarly, newly appointed Foreign Minister Iwaya received his first phone call from the U.S. Secretary of State, followed by his South Korean counterpart.

Nine days after his election, Ishiba held a summit meeting with President Yoon where the two leaders pledged to further enhance bilateral relations and to strengthen security collaboration with the United States against North Korea. Ishiba described close bilateral cooperation as "very important for regional peace and stability."<sup>29</sup>

## Weak Leader Seeks to Implement Strong Policies

The Japanese electorate did not vote to change policies, just politicians. Nor did voters abandon Japan's assessment of an increasingly dire security environment or reject Japan's bold security policies announced in December 2022 national security documents. The public embraced strengthening the alliance with the United States, doubling of Japan's defense budget,

developing counter-strike capabilities, and enhancing multilateral security, diplomatic, and economic cooperation in the Indo–Pacific region.

However, Japan will be forced to look inward, preoccupied with addressing domestic issues with an inefficient legislative process necessitating greater debate, deal-making, and concessions while the outside world becomes increasingly threatening. Prime Minister Ishiba will face daunting challenges of regaining public trust by implementing political reform and tackling a stagnant economy. He will need to prioritize domestic political and economic issues over foreign policy to a far greater degree than his predecessors.

In the near term, the Japanese leadership is stable in that Ishiba is probably safe from being forced from his office until the results of this year’s upper house election. If the LDP does poorly, Ishiba will likely have to take the blame and leave office, which could portend a return to the revolving door of prime ministers that Japan suffered before.

Ishiba will need to make progress while overseeing a minority government that will be far more inefficient than the past LDP control of both the executive and legislative branches of government. He will be beholden to minority and opposition parties for implementing his policies. How this process will work remains uncertain and will require politicians, legislators, and bureaucrats to develop and adapt to new procedures in which power is diffused amongst more actors.

Policy formulation by consensus and compromise will be slower and less decisive in a system already criticized for avoiding controversy and glacial decision-making. There is likely to be even greater resistance on the part of the opposition to various proposals to fund Japan’s planned hefty defense spending increase.

The recent surge in bilateral cooperation with South Korea is in jeopardy as a result of President Yoon’s impeachment. The progressive opposition party would likely win any election to replace Yoon and then would implement foreign and security policies that are at odds with Japanese and U.S. strategies.

A progressive president would resume the party’s conciliatory approach to North Korea, reducing pressure and offering massive economic benefits with few conditions in hopes of moderating Pyongyang’s behavior. The progressive party would also adopt a more nationalist approach to Japan, having stridently criticized Yoon’s outreach to Tokyo, branding his administration as “pro-Japanese traitors.”<sup>30</sup> A new progressive president could cancel trilateral military exercises, revoke the Camp David agreement on linking the three countries’ missile alert systems, and resist U.S. efforts for a greater South Korean regional security role against the encroaching China threat.

At a time when bold, decisive leadership is needed, there are increasing doubts in Washington that Japan can deliver on its security promises and maintain a strong leadership role in the region. A weakened, inward-looking Japan, hampered by a split government, could be an indecisive, risk-averse, and unreliable security partner for the new U.S. Administration.

## Recommendations for Tokyo and Washington

While the Ishiba administration will prioritize domestic political and economic issues to enhance the ruling LDP's chances in future elections, it cannot neglect pressing security challenges.

To improve its military capabilities, Japan should:

**Fully fund its defense budget.** In December 2022, Japan announced a comprehensive strategy for enhancing Japan's military capabilities and expanding its regional security role. However, Tokyo did not articulate commensurate plans for funding the pledged doubling of the nation's defense budget to 2 percent of its gross domestic product. Prime Minister Ishiba must convince the Japanese legislature to fully fund the planned defense increase despite competing budgetary priorities.

- **Incorporate Taiwan contingencies into Japanese defense planning.** The Ishiba administration should emphasize the importance of Taiwanese security to Japan's national strategic interests. Tokyo should delineate Japan's threat assessment, security strategy, and potential roles and policies in Taiwan contingencies, including its relationships with regional partners.
- **Explore ways to increase communication and coordination with Taiwan.** While direct senior-level political and military contact with Taipei may be politically untenable, both countries' coast guards and air traffic control authorities could be used as a proxy for coordinating maritime and aerial surveillance and reconnaissance, situational awareness, and real-time intelligence exchanges of Chinese military movements in the East China Sea.
- **Enlarge Japan's regional security role.** Tokyo pledged to augment its regional security role but has not clearly defined new roles and responsibilities. Tokyo should describe its intended regional roles and responsibilities, which could include increasing participation in regional multilateral military training and exercises in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands; assisting regional partners' security capacity-building,

particularly for maritime domain awareness and security; and protecting freedom of navigation and sea lanes of communication.

To enhance the U.S.–Japanese alliance, Tokyo and Washington should:

- **Operationalize their new U.S. and Japanese command structures.** Washington announced it would transition U.S. Forces Japan, which only had an administrative function, to the Joint Force Headquarters, which will be an operational command. Tokyo is concurrently creating the Japan Joint Operational Command, a combatant command with authority over all military forces to overcome the country's long-standing deficiencies in conducting joint operations. Both new organizations will be more effective war-fighting commands as well as enable greater bilateral military coordination. However, many questions remain about the parameters of each organization's responsibilities and how they will coordinate with each other. These uncertainties should be resolved expeditiously.
- **Enhance bilateral discussions on nuclear strategy and policy planning.** Since its creation in 2010, the U.S.–Japan Extended Deterrence Dialogue has been successful in addressing Japanese concerns about the viability of the U.S. extended deterrence guarantee. It now seems overshadowed by the more visible U.S.–South Korean Nuclear Consultative Group. As such, the initiative may need to be elevated in stature and other means explored to facilitate a more informed discussion with experts and the general public. Eventually, the dual U.S. nuclear consultative initiatives with Japan and South Korea could be coordinated or integrated with each other, including trilateral tabletop exercises and NATO-style Support of Nuclear Operations With Conventional Air Tactics (SNOWCAT) flight operations.
- **Enhance U.S.–Japan policy coordination and implementation for Taiwan contingencies.** Tokyo is augmenting forces and facilities in its southwest island chain near Taiwan and planning to procure longer-range missiles to extend protective coverage. Japan should closely coordinate its plans with the U.S. to identify complementary roles and missions, not only for the defense of Japan but also for a broader regional strategy. Washington should articulate its expectations of Japan's roles, while Tokyo should define the operational measures it is willing to take—and not willing to take—in the defense of Taiwan.

## Conclusion

As the incoming Trump Administration looks to combat the rising North Korean and Chinese threats to the region, Washington will be searching for reliable allies and partners and weighing their contributions. Until recently, both South Korea and Japan were stalwart and dependable allies.

But Ishiba's disastrous snap election decision has created uncertainty whether Tokyo can deliver on its promises to double the nation's defense spending, develop counter-strike capabilities against the growing North Korean nuclear and missile threats, and assume a larger security role in the Indo-Pacific, including Taiwan contingencies.

Coupled with the ramifications of South Korean President Yoon's impeachment, the United States is now allied with two floundering ships of state even as Washington debates setting its own course in the Indo-Pacific. Prospects for success are dimmer than just a few short months ago.

**Bruce Klingner** is Senior Research Fellow for Northeast Asia in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.

## Endnotes

1. Francis Tang, "Why Ishiba's Strategy of a Surprise Battle Backfired," *The Japan Times*, October 27, 2024, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/10/27/japan/politics/ldp-election-short-term-strategy/> (accessed December 18, 2024).
2. "Japan PM's Approval Rating Falls Ahead of Vote," *The Taipei Times*, October 22, 2024, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/world/archives/2024/10/22/2003825689> (accessed December 18, 2024).
3. "Japan's LDP Admits to Funding Branches Led by Scandal-Hit Members," *Kyodo News*, October 24, 2024, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2024/10/c35ccdbcb0c8-japans-ldp-admits-to-funding-branches-led-by-scandal-hit-members.html?phrase=nobita&words=> (accessed December 18, 2024).
4. Ishiba's signature issues included revising the Status of Forces Agreement with the United States, establishing an Asian NATO, an initializing nuclear sharing with Washington.
5. Kanako Takahara and Kathleen Benoza, "Japan Faces Political Upheaval After LDP-Led Coalition Loses Majority," *The Japan Times*, October 28, 2024, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/10/28/japan/politics/lower-house-election-results/> (accessed December 18, 2024).
6. Kathleen Benoza, "Ishiba Cabinet's Approval Rating Sinks to Around 30%," *The Japan Times*, October 30, 2024, [https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/10/30/japan/politics/ishiba-ratings-plunge/?utm\\_source=pianodnu&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=72&tpcc=dnu&pnespid=5.dow4hs6lfa8.c8vkc8r.eo9bwj\\_ifzwqgOrheptxcv.2u\\_sbqm2s6pic5.cwepzjszza](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/10/30/japan/politics/ishiba-ratings-plunge/?utm_source=pianodnu&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=72&tpcc=dnu&pnespid=5.dow4hs6lfa8.c8vkc8r.eo9bwj_ifzwqgOrheptxcv.2u_sbqm2s6pic5.cwepzjszza) (accessed December 18, 2024).
7. Helen Regan, "Japan's New PM Faces Major Test with an Election Just Weeks After Taking Office," CNN, October 26, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/10/26/asia/japan-elections-ldp-shigeru-ishiba-intl-hnk/index.html> (accessed December 18, 2024).
8. "Defence 'Geek' Shigeru Ishiba Is New Japan Prime Minister," NDTV World, October 3, 2024, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/shigeru-ishiba-defence-geek-is-new-japan-prime-minister-6693724> (accessed December 18, 2024).
9. Shigeru Ishiba, "Shigeru Ishiba on Japan's New Security Era: The Future of Japan's Foreign Policy," translation, Hudson Institute, September 25, 2024, <https://www.hudson.org/politics-government/shigeru-ishiba-japans-new-security-era-future-japans-foreign-policy> (accessed December 18, 2024).
10. Tobias Harris, "The Idealist," Substack: Observing Japan, September 24, 2024, <https://observingjapan.substack.com/p/the-idealist#footnote-16-149365538> (accessed December 18, 2024).
11. Jesse Johnson, "Ishiba's Goal of Revising U.S. Troops Pact Likely Long-Term Project," *The Japan Times*, October 16, 2024, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/10/16/japan/japan-us-status-of-forces-agreement/> (accessed December 18, 2024).
12. Ishiba, "Shigeru Ishiba on Japan's New Security Era: The Future of Japan's Foreign Policy."
13. "Press Conference by Prime Minister Ishiba," "The World and Japan" Database of Japanese Politics and International Relations, October 1, 2024, <https://worldjpn.net/documents/texts/PI/20241001.01E.html> (accessed December 18, 2024).
14. Ishiba, "Shigeru Ishiba on Japan's New Security Era: The Future of Japan's Foreign Policy."
15. Ibid.
16. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "The North Atlantic Treaty," April 4, 1949, [https://www.nato.int/cps/ie/natohq/official\\_texts\\_17120.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/ie/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm) (accessed December 18, 2024).
17. Hiroyuki Akiyama and Masahisa Tanaka, "Japan PM Ishiba Tempers Tone on Asian NATO, Nuclear Energy Reduction," *Nikkei Asia*, October 8, 2024, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Japan-s-new-PM/Japan-PM-Ishiba-tempers-tone-on-Asian-NATO-nuclear-energy-reduction> (accessed December 18, 2024).
18. Gearoid Reidy, "Japan PM's Flip-Flops Extend Beyond the BOJ," *Bloomberg*, October 3, 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2024-10-03/can-japan-s-new-prime-minister-ishiba-be-taken-seriously> (accessed December 18, 2024).
19. Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Press Conference by Foreign Minister Iwaya Takeshi," October 2, 2024, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/kaiken/kaikenwe\\_000001\\_00106.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/kaiken/kaikenwe_000001_00106.html) (accessed December 18, 2024).
20. Ibid.
21. Ishiba, "Shigeru Ishiba on Japan's New Security Era: The Future of Japan's Foreign Policy."
22. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "NATO's Nuclear Sharing Arrangements," February 2022, [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/2/pdf/220204-factsheet-nuclear-sharing-arrange.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/2/pdf/220204-factsheet-nuclear-sharing-arrange.pdf) (accessed December 18, 2024).
23. Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Three Non-Nuclear Principles," December 11, 1967, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/un/disarmament/nnp/index.html#:~:text=My%20responsibility%20is%20to%20achieve,line%20with%20Japan's%20Peace%20Constitution> (accessed December 18, 2024).
24. Yuki Tatsumi, Pamela Kennedy, and Kenji Nagayoshi, "Japan's Strategic Future and Implications for the US-Japan Alliance," *The Stimson Center*, February 28, 2024, <https://www.stimson.org/2024/japans-strategic-future-and-implications-for-the-us-japan-alliance/> (accessed December 18, 2024).
25. Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Press Conference by Foreign Minister Iwaya Takeshi."



26. Shizuka Kuramitsu, "Japan's New Leader Stirs Debate on Nuclear Sharing," Arms Control Association, November 2024, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2024-11/news/japans-new-leader-stirs-debate-nuclear-sharing> (accessed December 18, 2024).
27. U.S. Department of State, "U.S.–Japan Extended Deterrence Dialogue," June 17, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-japan-extended-deterrence-dialogue-3/> (accessed December 18, 2024).
28. Author interviews with South Korean and Japanese officials, September–October 2024.
29. Sarah Kim, "Yoon, Ishiba Pledge to Continue Improving Ties in First Bilateral Summit," *JoongAng Daily*, October 10, 2024, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2024-10-10/national/diplomacy/Yoon-Ishiba-pledge-to-continue-improving-ties-in-first-bilateral-summit/2152383> (accessed December 18, 2024).
30. Park Chan-kyong, "'Pro-Japanese Traitors': South Korea's Yoon Slammed Over Wartime Whitewashing," *South China Morning Post*, August 20, 2024, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3275091/pro-japanese-traitors-south-koreas-yoon-slammed-over-wartime-whitewashing> (accessed December 18, 2024).