



NUS
National University
of Singapore

EAI

EAST ASIAN INSTITUTE
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

EAI COMMENTARY

No. 39 15 October 2021

The Rise of Kishida Fumio and Its Implications

By LIM Tai Wei

Compared to former Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide who rose through the ranks and not from a political family, Kishida Fumio is a more likely scion candidate for prime ministership in Japan's political world. His father and grandfather were House of Representatives parliamentarians. Although Kishida has been criticised for being timid and indecisive in politics, there are few criticisms levelled against Kishida's ability to navigate Japan in complex geopolitics. Indeed, Kishida has performed well as foreign minister for more than four years, the most experienced Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) candidate to lead Japan in foreign policy.

In the party contest round, Kishida addressed and reversed all concerns about his administrative ability. First, he showed his decisiveness and strength in publicly expressing regional security concerns raised by the Trump/Biden administrations, Australian/Indian/EU counterparts and South Korean/Filipino/Vietnamese concerns. Yet, Japan's positions on Myanmar, China's application for Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership membership, regional trade (including Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership), Winter Olympics and COVID-19 mitigation are perhaps closer to ASEAN and/or Chinese positions. Kishida's approach reflects this form of nuanced balance between two superpowers and their networks in the world today.

Unlike South Korea which is developing submarine-launched cruise missiles, long-range ballistic missiles and stealth fighters and Taiwan is building long-range cruise missile systems, Japan is constitutionally prohibited from developing any of these offensive weapons systems. Japan's pacifist stance in the region is hence likely to hold under Kishida, a native of Hiroshima, the first site that suffered the world's one of only two atomic bombings (the other being Nagasaki). Kishida naturally opposes the use of nuclear weapons. For example, North Korea and China have far less to worry about militarily from Japan than others in the region like South Korea and Taiwan that are developing weapons systems which can reach most of Northeast Asia.

EAI COMMENTARY

Former Prime Minister Suga has left him a set of good cards as COVID cases were down to low numbers and the Olympics Games were also successfully held with the largest gold haul in Japanese Olympic history. Domestically, the Kishida strategy appears to be based on traditional *habatsu* factional balancing of different forces within the party by inviting all their representatives to be part of the cabinet and government while keeping the status quo for the majority of the ministers. By doing so, Kishida now has the backing of all the powerful *genro* (party elders) factions behind him.

This stable bedrock strategy will lead the party unproblematically through an election to be called by November 2021 and through the Upper House election in 2022. This will enable Kishida to have three years of uninterrupted rule, without having to keep an eye out for short-term electioneering issues. Although questions remain as to whether Kishida's public policy on fairer distribution amid an ageing and shrinking population will create more public debt (and thereby relegating potential debt concerns to his successors), Kishida seeks to garner electoral support by offering more material benefits to voters when the elections are held in November 2021.

Kishida's domestic political agenda includes reducing social inequality in Japan. He argues that the benefits of Abenomics have not really trickled down to many Japanese households. Kishida might have adopted this populist line with an eye on the forthcoming general election this October and wants to differentiate himself from Abe and Suga by emphasising the redistribution of wealth for the masses. Kishida hails from the Kochikai faction whose founder, former Prime Minister Ikeda Hayato, was famous for his "income doubling" policy. Ikeda avoided the polarising issue of the 1960 revision of the US-Japan alliance and other right-wing ideological agendas of his predecessor Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke (Abe Shinzo's maternal grandfather). Another notable former prime minister from the Kochikai faction was Miyazawa Kiichi, also from Hiroshima and an inspiration and role model to Kishida (including teaching him to behave humbly---Kishida is noted for washing the dishes and cleaning the bathroom in his household). Miyazawa and the Kochikai faction (when Miyazawa was the leader of the Kochikai faction, it was known as the Miyazawa faction) advocated distributive politics and did not incorporate right-wing ideology into their ethos.

Kishida will need to cater to big business industrial interests which want incremental rather than leapfrog reforms. The big business lobby groups are traditionally aligned with old China hands and pro-Beijing factions to tune down temperatures with its giant neighbour. In addition, the Biden administration has clearly laid the path for Japan to intensify its relations with Beijing, given the spate of political moves made recently by the Biden administration. They include freeing Meng Wanzhou in a special deal, unbanning Tik Tok, cooperating with Beijing on climate change/Korean Peninsula issues, moderating Trumpist charges of lab leak theory, importation of more Chinese products under the stimulus package and making phone calls to Beijing/Moscow after the Afghanistan withdrawal. This sends a signal to its Northeast Asian allies that the United States is improving its relations with Beijing and expecting Tokyo to do likewise to iron out any ripples caused by the previous US administration.

Most importantly, the first physical Quad meeting that took place in the White House in Washington DC showed more details and shape of a US-led Quad system. The system has become modular in nature, allowing Quad members to plug into the Quad system based on their own levels of comfort and national interests. For example, Australia can moderate its involvement in climate change issues (due to its resource dependence and lobby) while increasing military alliance in AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom and United States); India can maintain its traditional friendship with Russia while expecting more US military tech

EAI COMMENTARY

transfers and Japan can do likewise as well. This may eventually encourage South Korea, Vietnam and Indonesia to potentially become Quad-lite members.

Kishida's key appointment holders reveal some political directions for his future administration. The retention of Defence Minister Kishi Nobuo reveals a desire to keep the ironclad US-Japan alliance which is now embedded within military alliances like AUKUS, Five Eyes, Quad, Thai/Filipino/ROK-US alliances, GSOMIA and NATO. The appointment of Abe-era Suzuki Shunichi and Hagiuda Koichi as finance and trade ministers respectively indicated a desire to maintain stable trade ties with China and the ASEAN region. The Amari Akira (newly appointed secretary general) faction (which is also associated with the Aso Taro faction) and his factional member Harvard-trained Kobayashi Takayuki as economic security minister will put US, South Korean (currently in a less positive mood towards China) and Taiwanese business interests at ease of any sensitive leakage of sensitive technologies to rival nations. This is important as Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company is decentralising its production facilities by building a fab plant in Arizona and Japan.

Kishida's cabinet members embraced the Aso Taro faction, the largest Hosoda Hiroyuki faction which appeals to moderates in Japan, and the third largest Takeshita faction whose member Harvard-educated Motegi Toshimitsu is the English-speaking foreign minister. Some conservatives like Ishiba Shigeru and Ishihara Nobuteru, right-wing members like Takaichi Sanae, the highly progressive pro-reform Kono Taro and Koizumi Shinjiro (who do not belong to a faction but is close to Kono) were left out of this round of appointments. One reason for Koizumi Shinjiro's support of Kono Taro is they both share an anti-nuclear power stance after the 2011 triple disasters (the Great East Japan Earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown at Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant).

On Northeast Asian diplomacy, Kishida appears to be pragmatic in offering to talk to North Korea which has just tested its first cruise missile and alleged hypersonic weapon in addition to its ballistic missiles, submarine launched ballistic missile and short-range manoeuvrable ballistic arsenal that it had previously tested. The all-important *rachi mondai* (Japanese citizens kidnapped by North Koreans) issue for the conservatives remains unresolved. Kishida also has a chance at establishing diplomatic ties with Russian President Putin who is keen on signing a post-war peace treaty with Japan. Japanese political leaders are taking a wait-and-see approach in their diplomacy with South Korea to see who takes charge after the South Korean Presidential Election on 9 March 2022. Tokyo is also tracking rising assertive Chinese moves in the disputed East China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.

Overall, the first litmus test of Kishida as a credible LDP President and Japanese Prime Minister is to win the forthcoming October 2021 General Election.

LIM Tai Wei is an Adjunct Senior Research Fellow at the East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore.

EAI commentaries serve to provide quick insights on current topics, based on ongoing research. The opinions expressed in the commentaries are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the East Asian Institute, or its Board Members.