

**KISHIDA AND JAPAN: IN SEARCH
OF A MIDDLE ROLE IN ASIA**

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EAI Background Brief No. 1624

Date of Publication: 27 January 2022

Executive Summary

1. In October 2021, Japan had a new prime minister, Kishida Fumio, a moderate of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and a former foreign minister. Kishida came to power unexpectedly, amidst significant international changes, from the US withdrawal from Afghanistan to the formation of a new security pact, AUKUS, between Australia, the UK and the United States.
2. Kishida's views on foreign policy have their roots in the former mainstream Yoshida doctrine: A lightly armed US ally that emphasises economic growth over acquiring military power. Kishida claims he is pragmatic, realistic and flexible in adjusting to changing conditions. His appointment may mark an end to the reign of right-wing nationalism in Japan.
3. When elected, Kishida led the party to success in the general election of the House of Representatives, which enabled him to appoint Hayashi Yoshimasa as foreign minister. Hayashi is the chairman of the Japan-China parliamentary friendship group and a counter-balance to Defence Minister Kishi Nobuo, Abe Shinzo's younger brother, who is the secretary of the Japan-Taiwan parliamentary group.
4. Abe's eight years of premiership was strong on a sense of mission, but poor on delivery. Most of Abe's signature policies, from Abenomics to making women shine, had so far been a flop. Hosting the Olympics was an unpopular enterprise and Japan slipped down world rankings in both gender equality and freedom of press.
5. However, the lifting of the long-held self-imposed ban on the right to collective self-defence in 2014 through a cabinet decision to reinterpret Article 9 of the constitution was Abe's major achievement from the perspective of enhancing Japan's security policy options, and from the US perspective of pushing Japan to "normalise" militarily.
6. Abe is also credited for formulating policies and blueprints (including the Free and Open Indo-Pacific [FOIP] vision and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue [QUAD])

to gear up Japan's economic strategy and defence posture in ways that also enhanced the operability of the security alliance with the United States.

7. Nonetheless, the recent rush by the West to adjust their relations with China finds Japan in a relatively settled, moderate position vis-à-vis both China and the West. Japan's role is likely to be pivotal as the region moves towards a more multi-pillar arrangement of political, economic and security relations.
8. In East Asia, Japan has pursued its own interests independent of the United States, while remaining a faithful US ally. This volatile region, particularly in Southeast Asia that is trying to avoid choosing sides in the US-China rivalry, may find a modicum of stability or a balancing force in Japan.
9. The latest visit by right wing parliamentarians to the Yasukuni Shrine on Pearl Harbour Day and Abe's statement that any Taiwan contingency is an emergency for Japan do not represent Japanese government policy. However, they needlessly fuel regional anxiety of an unrepentant Japan, and only complicate Kishida's already difficult job.