



2024-16(S)

Shigeru Ishiba's New Cabinet's Foreign and Security Policy and the Prospects for Korea-Japan Relations

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2024.10.7

On September 27, Shigeru Ishiba, the former secretary-general of Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), was elected as the new president of the LDP. In Japan's parliamentary cabinet system, the leader of the ruling party becomes prime minister. On October 1, Ishiba was elected Japan's 102nd prime minister following a nomination election held during an extraordinary Diet session. Despite his considerable popularity, Ishiba was regarded as a long shot due to his status as a non-mainstream figure within the LDP and his lack of support from fellow National Assembly members. He was elected based on passive support from within the party, amid concerns about former Environment Minister Shinjiro Koizumi's lack of preparedness and former Economic and Security Minister Sanae Takaichi's hardline stance in the three-way race. In addition, strategic decisions were made to win the upcoming House of Representatives and Upper House elections, as well as to secure the support of former Prime Ministers Yoshihide Suga and Fumio Kishida. The term of the LDP president is three years, and the results of the upcoming House of Representatives and Upper House elections will determine the length of Ishiba's tenure as prime minister. On October 27, Ishiba announced the House of Representatives elections. Should he perform well in the two upcoming elections with strong public support, his chances of remaining in power will increase.

Ishiba, often referred to as the "opposition within the ruling party," has been bitterly critical of the LDP and vocal about the necessity for Japan to confront its history with South Korea. Consequently, there are elevated expectations in South Korea that he will demonstrate a more progressive approach. Nevertheless, given Ishiba's lack of substantial support within the LDP, it would be premature to expect significant outcomes. Instead, South Korea should prioritize the resolution of historical disputes through a rational, logical approach, fostering bilateral relations, and strengthening bilateral cooperation based on national interests. On the other hand, the establishment of an "Asian version of NATO," a reassessment of nuclear sharing,

and a reevaluation of the “Three Non-Nuclear Principles” are unlikely in the near term, as opinions are divided even within Japan. Nonetheless, there is an opportunity to engage in discourse and identify areas of mutual benefit, despite the prevailing unstable international climate. This allows for the sharing of a long-term vision, a gradual pace of progress, and the facilitation of progressive discussions. In this regard, South Korea must articulate its concerns and positions with precision, underscoring that significant cooperation in the security domain is unlikely without tangible progress on historical matters. Although South Korea places a high value on security cooperation with the United States, and Japan to maintain peace and stability in the region, achieving such cooperation is challenging without first addressing historical issues and concerns about Japan’s military expansion.

Nevertheless, Ishiba’s cabinet is expected to facilitate numerous opportunities for South Korea. First and foremost, Ishiba’s view of historical issues aligns with that of South Korea. Additionally, many members of his cabinet prioritize the cultivation of relations with South Korea. Additionally, Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya, Defense Minister Gen Nakatani, and former Prime Ministers Suga and Kishida, who played pivotal roles in Ishiba’s electoral success and are regarded as close associates, will also lend their support to efforts to sustain the current atmosphere of enhanced relations.

The inauguration of a new administration in Japan marks a new phase in South Korea-Japan relations. The appointment of a new Prime Minister, Ishiba, who is relatively understanding of South Korea’s position and cautious, is expected to contribute to a reduction in the unrest currently observed in South Korea-Japan relations and to the continuation of the recent improvements. Furthermore, the two countries are now well-positioned to engage in more collaborative endeavors. In addition to diplomatic and security matters, discussions on shared concerns, such as rural decline and natural disasters, are expected to become more frequent. While it may be optimistic to expect Ishiba to achieve the same level of progress that South Korea would like to see, his limited support within his own party and the significant differences in perception regarding historical issues could complicate matters. Nevertheless, it is important to strive to enhance the current relationship by focusing on areas of mutual cooperation.

This article is an English Summary of Asan Issue Brief (2024-25).

(‘이시바 시게루(石破茂) 신내각의 외교안보정책과 한일관계 전망’, <https://www.asaninst.org/?p=95840>)



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