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The Inauguration of the Kishida Cabinet and Prospects for Korea-Japan Relations

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On September 29, Fumio Kishida won the leadership contest for Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), becoming the LDP's 27th president and Japan's 100th Prime Minister of Japan. The new Kishida Cabinet succeeds that of Shinzo Abe, which lasted for seven years and eight months, and the one-year Cabinet of Yoshihide Suga. The launch of the new Japanese Cabinet will have a significant impact on Korea's diplomatic relations with Japan and Korea-Japan relations.

The Kishida Cabinet's Foreign and Security Policy

However, Japan's diplomacy and security policies are not expected to significantly change, despite the new Kishida Cabinet. Even from its inception, it failed to overcome the limitations of Japanese factional politics and the influence of vested forces centered on former Prime Minister Abe and Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso. Through this election, Abe demonstrated his enduring political influence, and Aso, who maintained his position from Abe's second Cabinet to Suga's Cabinet for more than eight years and nine months, expanded his influence. Moreover, while most of the new Cabinet's major posts were replaced, the foreign affairs and defense portfolios were unchanged. This suggests that Prime Minister Kishida will continue Abe and Suga's foreign policies and value the continuity of diplomacy.

In fact, the foreign and security policies announced during the LDP presidential election are not much different from those that Abe and Suga considered important during their tenures. Kishida argues that diplomacy should be based on "trust" in light of his four-year and seven-month experience as a foreign minister in the Abe Cabinet. Consequently, he mentioned three "resolutions" for diplomacy: first, protecting the universal values of democracy, human rights, and rule of law based on the US-Japan alliance; second, protecting Japan's territory, territorial waters, and airspace; and third, leading on the resolution of global issues. In the face of growing regional authoritarianism, Kishida promised to respond resolutely with the United States, Australia, and India for peace in the Taiwan Strait; strengthen the maritime security agency's capabilities; strengthen missile defense capabilities; and revise national security strategies, non-proliferation, and disaster management.

In addition, Kishida mentioned he will exert maximum pressure with the entire international community on the North Korean issue to reach a complete abandonment of nuclear and missile development while aiming for the immediate return of kidnapped Japanese victims in North Korea. Also, he mentioned that he will push for a full return of the Northern Territories from Russia. In addition, Kishida highly valued the Abe Cabinet's efforts to strengthen the Japan-U.S. alliance and expressed his intention to realize the "Free and Open India-Pacific (FOIP)." Given these points, the basic diplomatic direction first pursued by the Abe Cabinet is expected to be maintained by Kishida, including strengthening links with democratic countries, participating in the Biden administration's international cooperation approach, and strengthening cooperation with the Quad.

On the other hand, the new Cabinet position of "Minister for Economic Security" is noteworthy. This is a measure to cope with changes in the international order, such as the U.S.-China conflict, and can be seen as an indication of Japan's perception of threats in the gradually intensifying U.S.-China conflict. The Minister for Economic Security has the authority to give instructions to all ministries, including the National Security Secretariat (NSS), and its importance is emphasized as a head of economic and security policies. In addition, the Minister is in charge of securing major supplies, such as semiconductors and preventing technology leaks, and is also in charge of the Economic Security Promotion Act, which can stabilize the Japanese people's lives and economic activities in case of emergency without relying too heavily on China. Japan's policy to strengthen economic security can be interpreted as increasing its ability to balance against China. The Kochikai faction within the LDP led by Kishida is traditionally considered liberal as it prioritizes the economy, values cooperative diplomacy with the U.S., but also values Asia-Pacific relations such as China and South Korea. However, it is likely to strengthen its support for balancing against China as the U.S.-China conflict intensifies and anti-China sentiment in Japan increases.

The Kishida Cabinet's Approach to Korea-Japan Relations

Meanwhile, it will be difficult to expect a rapid change in Korea-Japan relations for the time being. The major issues between Korea and Japan are the "comfort women" issue, forced labor issue, and Japan's export restrictions to Korea. But, resolving any of these problems is not an easy task. The South Korean government wants to solve the export restriction problem first, but this is also not easy because the issue is intertwined with the forced labor problem. Moreover, it is worth recalling that, as Foreign Minister, Kishida was the Japanese signatory to the 2015 'Comfort Women Agreement between Korea-Japan.' Furthermore, many of the key figures who enacted the export restrictions on Korea in 2019 were appointed again in Kishida's Cabinet.

Therefore, it is unlikely that the current situation between Korea and Japan will change soon. This is because Prime Minister Kishida and key policymakers around him involved in the export restriction issue are unlikely to suddenly walk back their past decisions and policies at risk to their reputations.

In addition, Kishida has stated, "I will decide whether to visit Yasukuni Shrine or not based on the timing and situation," as well as "It is important to send information so that other countries do not recognize 'Dokdo (known as Takeshima in Japan)' as Korean territory." Conflicts over the aforementioned issues are likely to continue.

Five Recommendations for Improving Korea-Japan Relations

Then, what will happen in the near future and what should be done to improve Korea-Japan relations? First, attention should be paid to the upcoming October 31 House of Representatives election and the House of Councilors election scheduled for next summer. One of the reasons former Prime Minister Abe was able to establish and strengthen executive control for seven years and eight months was that he secured momentum by winning all six major elections during his tenure. Prime Minister Kishida's political influence and consolidation of his Cabinet will be possible only after winning both consecutive elections and solidifying his political support. It is only then that we can expect a shift or improvement in Korea-Japan relations.

Second, Korea and Japan should cooperate where possible. It is difficult to expect immediate changes in Korea-Japan relations. Therefore, it is necessary to move forward on areas of potential progress, steadily build trust, and manage relations to gradually restore relations. For this, private exchanges between Korea and Japan, which have been virtually suspended, must be restored first. While the COVID-19 pandemic will make it hard to restore short-term visits for tourism purposes, mid- to long-term residents such as international students, workers, expatriates, and business exchanges should be restored step by step and progressively to discuss cooperation.

Third, efforts at confidence building and laying the foundation for resolving bilateral issues are needed rather than rushing to resolve problems. Trying to produce fast results on the back of the launch of a new Japanese Cabinet is likely to have adverse effects. Moreover, both Korea and Japan will soon hold national elections and enter a period of political volatility, so any rash attempts to improve relations risk backfiring or becoming domestic electoral issues. The currently toxic state of relations needs to be managed to prevent any further deterioration while laying the groundwork for improved trust and dispute resolution. Ultimately, this will need to come from the leader level and a commitment and agreement to improve relations.

Fourth, it is necessary to cooperate between Korea, Japan, and the United States in responding to the North Korean issue. Korea and Japan face a common threat from North Korea. Amid the recent escalation of the North Korean nuclear threat, the need for trilateral cooperation between Korea, Japan, and the United States is increasing. Setting aside historical disputes, Korea and Japan need to set the stage for cooperation about the North Korean issue. Specifically, it is necessary to share intelligence and assessments regarding North Korean issues, strengthen Korea-Japan-U.S. cooperation mechanisms through regularization of inter-governmental working-level and high-level meetings, and continue Korea-Japan strategic dialogue with neighboring countries to prepare for possible

provocations and terrorism by the North Korea. In addition, efforts should be made to normalize the currently unstable GSOMIA between Korea and Japan as well as strengthen cooperation for the common goal of a peaceful Korean Peninsula and safe Northeast Asia.

Fifth, Korea and Japan should cooperate on establishing a joint economic security response system. Amid deepening U.S.-China conflict, Korea and Japan, which are in a similar situation, should seek survival strategies together. Japan is actively pursuing economic security strategies in various fields in response to the U.S.-China confrontation. Korea also needs to thoroughly prepare for this situation. For the two countries, it would be helpful to enhance dialogue, share best practices, and identify response options. Discussions on various strategic dialogues between Korea and Japan should be expanded. Only then can we expect the bilateral relationship to move beyond historical animosity and harness the complementary dynamics that cooperation can offer.

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