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Implications of Japan's LDP Presidential Election Result

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Abstract

In the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) presidential election held on September 27, Ishiba Shigeru, former Secretary General of the LDP, was elected as the next president and sworn in as Prime Minister of Japan. This issue brief aims to analyze the reasons behind Ishiba's victory and its implications. A key factor for Ishiba's election as LDP president was the growing consensus that he could boost support in the upcoming House of Representatives election. Additionally, the diminishing factional power within the party following the LDP slush fund scandal revitalized Ishiba's previously precarious political standing. Furthermore, the unstable geopolitical environment surrounding Northeast Asia positioned Ishiba, an expert in defense issues, as an appealing candidate for the Prime Minister's office. The inauguration of dovish Prime Minister Ishiba presents a promising opportunity for continued advances in Korea-Japan relations; however, caution is warranted regarding Japan's forward-looking measures toward Korea. Next year marks the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries. While Prime Minister Ishiba's election could lead to a renewed Korea-Japan joint declaration in 2025, it may burden Ishiba. Nevertheless, there is optimism that Ishiba will take positive steps to improve relations between Korea and Japan. His vision for an Asian version of NATO is premised on reconciliation, mutual trust, and cooperation between Korea and Japan, suggesting that such attempts per se at collective security can positively impact bilateral relations. The Korean government should expand, deepen, and refine the 1.5 and 2.0 track dialogues without adding burdens while continuing to strengthen progress made through shuttle diplomacy, security dialogue, and Korea-U.S.-Japan cooperation.

Keywords

Liberal Democratic Party Presidential Election. Ishiba Shigeru, House of Representatives Election, Disbanding of LDP Factions, Asian Version of NATO, Korea-Japan Cooperation

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In the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) presidential election held on September 27, Ishiba Shigeru, former Secretary General of LDP, was elected as the party president and took office as Prime Minister. Ishiba, a moderate conservative, came in second in the first round of voting to far-right Takaichi Sanae but defeated Takaichi by 21 votes in the second round. Despite consistently ranking first in public opinion polls, Ishiba's unstable political base within the party raised doubts about his chances. However, with the LDP's approval rating falling to around 20%, Ishiba was seen as capable of enhancing competitiveness in the upcoming House of Representatives election, leading LDP members to believe he could boost pro-LDP sentiment among voters. In a political landscape where the double layer of protection derived from factional affiliation and LDP popularity has weakened, and amid rising international uncertainties-particularly in Ukraine, the Middle East, and North Korea-LDP opted for Ishiba, who has substantial experience and high public support, to improve LDP approval ratings. It is necessary to analyze the reasons for Ishiba's victory in this LDP presidential election and assess its implications.

Reasons for Ishiba's Victory

One major reason for Ishiba's election as LDP president is the consensus that he can bolster support for the LDP in the upcoming House of Representatives election. Ishiba, known as the oppositional element within the LDP, has been quite competitive in expanding LDP's moderate base. As the Asahi poll revealed that the LDP's approval rating fell to 19% for the first time last June, alongside a decline in Prime Minister Kishida's approval ratings, public opinion was predominantly skeptical about the LDP's commitment to political reform following the slush fund scandal. There was a widespread sense of crisis within the party, with over 50% of respondents preferring an alternative to the LDP, which made improving approval ratings crucial for the party's success. This is exemplified by the popularity of former environment minister Koizumi Shinjiro, who, despite his inexperience and young age (43), was favored in the first round.

Second, the weakening cohesion and binding power of factional forces after the LDP slush fund scandal provided a turning point for Ishiba, who previously held a precarious position within the party. Kishida's post-scandal political reforms within the LDP, which involved disbanding factions, did not eradicate factional politics. Despite Kishida's failure in political reform, it can be argued that he did somewhat diminish factional influence. In particular, within the dominant Abe faction, no strong leader has yet emerged to succeed Abe. Meanwhile, as the Abe faction announced its dissolution, Ishiba, who has not been affiliated with any factions, benefited from lawmakers' increased autonomy, allowing his centrist conservatism to resonate with voters.

Third, the unstable geopolitical security situation surrounding Northeast Asia likely favored Ishiba's defense expertise. As former Secretary-General of the Liberal Democratic Party, he has

extensive experience coordinating party and government opinions. As is widely known, Ishiba is a defense expert who served as Minister of Defense in the past. To strengthen Japan's security leadership with an emphasis on improved relations with neighboring countries, he is proposing an Asian version of NATO, that is, a new East Asian collective security system centered around the U.S.-Japan alliance. This plan includes pursuing constitutional amendments concerning the Self-Defense Forces' status, appealing to both hard-core and moderate conservatives. The plan to link the constitutional revision to his independent security model, the Asian version of NATO, continues to be fleshed out. Given the deteriorating global security environment due to the Russia-Ukraine war, the Israel-Hamas war, the North Korean nuclear issue, the close ties of North Korea with Russia under the U.S.-China strategic competition, and the Middle East situation becoming more uncertain with the continued escalation of war, Ishiba emerged as a relatively trustworthy alternative.

Implications

The inauguration of dovish Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru presents a favorable moment for Korea-Japan relations to continue the progress made so far. However, caution is warranted regarding Japan's proactive measures toward Korea. First of all, it is important to note that in this presidential election, far-right candidate Takaichi Sanae ranked first in the first round of voting and garnered nearly a majority in the second. For Prime Minister Ishiba, who has been perceived as an outsider within the party, to resolve the divisiveness revealed during the election process, unify the party, and solidify his leadership, he will likely seek some degree of compromise and balance with hardline conservatives while taking into account their expectations. This may limit Ishiba, a center-right prime minister, in articulating and actualizing his relatively forward-looking perceptions of Korea-Japan

relations. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to anticipate that Prime Minister Ishiba will gradually advance policies aimed at improving bilateral relations. Above all, unlike his predecessor Kishida, Prime Minister Ishiba won this presidential election through a joint coalition with moderate conservative forces of Kishida and Suga. In fact, after former Prime Minister Kishida was elected with the support of the hard-core conservative Abe faction, he inherited Abe's legacy and policies, such as revising the peace constitution, securing Japan's ability to attack enemy bases, and strengthening defense capabilities. Thus, Kishida inevitably had to walk a path that contradicted his dovish reputation and identity. This suggests that the political approach and stance between Kishida and Ishiba will be slightly different.

Ishiba maintained a competitive and confrontational posture with Abe and has advocated for more forward-looking measures on the part of Japan regarding historical issues between Korea and Japan. In his recently published book, Ishiba also expressed the need for a proactive response from Japan to Korea's initiatives to improve relations. Through this, it is possible to gauge Ishiba's intention to improve relations to some extent and thus, to predict that the Korea-Japan relations, which were advanced under the Kishida administration, could be upgraded to the next level. Prime Minister Ishiba's advocacy for an Asian version of NATO, and such a collective security plan requires trust and cooperation not only with the United States but also with neighboring Korea. However, many experts are skeptical about the feasibility of such an alliance, not only in neighboring countries, such as Korea and the United States, but also in Japan. For an Asian version of NATO to materialize, Japan's Peace Constitution must be revised first, and such a strong collective security alliance has significant costs, including the possibility of provoking China and others in the region. Nonetheless, in the context of Korea-Japan relations alone, Ishiba's attempt to build a new collective security system

presupposes reconciliation, mutual trust, and cooperation between the two, so even if an Asian version of NATO is not realized, Ishiba's intention to pursue the collective security plan per se can still be expected to have a positive effect on Korea-Japan relations.

Next year marks the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Korea and Japan. With Ishiba's election, there is potential for a renewed Korea-Japan joint declaration in 2025, but this may burden Ishiba. In that sense, the Korean government should continue strengthening shuttle diplomacy, security dialogues, and Korea-U.S.-Japan cooperation while expanding and deepening the 1.5 and 2.0 track dialogues. For instance, the tentatively named Korea-Japan 21st Century Dialogue, involving politicians, policy officials, business leaders, journalists, and academic experts, could be held annually in both countries. In such a scenario, Prime Minister Ishiba could deliver the keynote speech at the dialogue held in Korea, while President Yoon would do so in Japan. These symbolic gestures by the leaders of both countries can bolster the atmosphere of improved relations without political strain. This improved environment for reconciliation could deepen the breadth and depth of cooperation by managing public opinion sensitive to military and security collaboration. Expediting this process will facilitate discussions and a shared understanding of various military and security cooperation alternatives.

To date, Korea and Japan have engaged in various 1.5-track dialogues, and as the 60th anniversary approaches, there is a pressing need to upgrade these efforts for more sustainable reconciliation and cooperation. This requires building a cooperation platform that is both realistic and sustainable, minimizing burdens on domestic politics in both countries. In particular, after solidifying the common interests, cooperation methods, and shared awareness of historical issues through agreement, a list of

joint actions should be developed and published to translate into policy, which participants can then make into a joint declaration. These conversations can be a starting point for forming a shared identity and understanding between the two nations.

The views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position of INSS.