



Meet Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba: Challenges Ahead for Japan

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Summary

Japan's newly minted prime minister, Shigeru Ishiba, faces enormous domestic and foreign policy challenges. Coming from a different tradition from his immediate predecessors, Ishiba's ability to manage these challenges before him will determine his political longevity in a country where prime ministers change frequently.

On 1 October 2024, Shigeru Ishiba of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) became Japan's new prime minister. He comes from a different political tradition within the LDP from two of his immediate predecessors – Yoshihide Suga and Fumio Kishida – who worked closely and held senior cabinet posts in the Shinzo Abe administration from 2012 to 2020 and carried on Abe's policy directions both domestically and in foreign affairs.

The new prime minister faces [enormous policy challenges](#) on both domestic and foreign policy fronts.

As party president, Ishiba will need to unite his party, as the nine candidates running for the presidency owe their allegiance to different factions and groups. While some have thrown their weight behind Ishiba by joining cabinet and party posts, others, like Sanae Takaichi, remain outside the government, waiting for another opportunity for the top job.

Secondly, Ishiba has announced a snap election for the Lower House to be held on 27 October 2024. Scandals have rocked the LDP, and its unholy relationship with the Unification Church and Abe's association with it, the reason that the assassin allegedly shot him dead, remains unsolved. These became [Kishida's Achilles heel](#), plummeting his popularity and forcing him to step down.

Thirdly, Ishiba will be tested on his economic policy to determine whether he can deliver people-oriented policies and, simultaneously, whether the market likes them.

The election results will be a test to determine whether Ishiba can restore the voter trust by his promise to clean up the party.

On the foreign policy front, Ishiba's strength is defence and security. He not only headed defence twice as a minister but has written extensively on this issue and is known as a defence geek for his knowledge and interest in this field.

He proposed an Asian version of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), a regional collective security mechanism to deal with the tense regional security environment where China, Russia and North Korea have formed an axis. Even though Ishiba talked about it during

his presidential election campaigning, he paused it and did not mention it in his first policy speech. During his [Diet speech](#), Ishiba stated, “Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow”. This phrase is borrowed straight from Kishida’s speeches. His statement that “consistent with the vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, we will uphold the international order based on the rule of law and lead efforts to further ensure safety and stability in the region” indicates that he will follow Abe’s and Kishida’s foreign policy directions and not make any significant shift, at least not immediately.

On the Japan-United States (US) alliance, Ishiba has advocated renegotiating the terms of the status of US forces in Japan to make the relationship more equal. Still, he did not mention it in his policy speech. He [acknowledged](#) that “the Japan-US alliance is the cornerstone of Japanese diplomacy and security and the foundation for the peace and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region and the international community as a whole.” A new regional security architecture and renegotiating with the US may be his policy goals, which he pursued before he won the contest. However, a reality check has forced Ishiba to put them on the back burner.

He told parliament that creating a NATO-like alliance would not be possible “overnight”, stressing the necessity of future debates. This and other ideas of Ishiba will now first be [discussed and debated within the LDP](#) before they are brought to the floor of parliament for further discussion. [India’s External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar](#) poured a bucket of cold water on the NATO-like architecture. [Nor has the idea got traction in Southeast Asia](#), as the group worries this will create a fissure in the region on how to deal with China. A [top US official has commented](#) that an Asian NATO is “not what we’re looking for in the region”.

With such responses, the [newly-appointed foreign minister, Takeshi Iwaya](#), went into damage control and downplayed it by commenting that “it’s one idea for the future” for building better relations with like-minded nations to create a better security environment through a deterrence mechanism.

Ishiba’s first overseas visit as prime minister was to Southeast Asia to attend the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in Laos. He did not raise the defence issue; [his remarks](#) broadly aligned with his predecessors’ foreign policy directions. Among many meetings with the regional leaders on the sidelines of the ASEAN summit, including with Chinese Premier Li Qiang, Ishiba also met with India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the [two leaders affirmed](#) that they are “natural partners” and expressed the hope to cooperate further in areas such as defence, security, and economy, and to “dramatically expand people-to-people exchanges.”

Ishiba’s road ahead is bumpy as he will need to unify the party, restore voter confidence in the tarnished LDP through careful policy change and constantly get a high approval rate for his cabinet for him to continue in power, as challengers such as Takaichi are waiting in the wings.

Regarding foreign policy, Ishiba must be cautious as he deals with a tense regional strategic environment and how he engages China and navigates his way to the new president of the White House.

The relationship with India will remain steady and robust as Japan eyes India more than ever for strategic and economic reasons.

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