

General Drift - Japan's new Prime Minister: from China Dove to China Hawk

Monday 6 December 2021, by [FISCHETTI Andrea A.](#), [ROTH Antoine](#) (Date first published: 6 December 2021).

The new leader of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and Japan's new Prime Minister Kishida Fumio has positioned himself as a moderate and a liberal for most of his political career and this also true in the realm of foreign policy. With deep family ties to Hiroshima, he has called for a world without nuclear weapons and has spent much of the 2000's openly opposing his party's ascendant right wing. While his colleagues dwelled on China's rise and military expansion and put increasing emphasis on relations with the United States as guarantor of Japan's security, Kishida [argued](#) instead that his country needed to balance relations between the two major powers.

As Japan's longest serving foreign minister for the Abe administration between 2012 to 2017, he emphasized his moderation in comparison to the prime minister's hard-line attitude. Eventually, Kishida's side of the argument seemed to prevail when Abe proposed to cooperate with Xi Jinping's flagship Belt and Road Initiative, opening the way for renewed diplomatic engagement between the two countries.

Yet judging by the remarks Kishida made during the LDP leadership election, it appears that he has rethought his position and joined the increasingly loud chorus of China hawks in Tokyo. He now [expresses](#) deep concerns about the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) authoritarianism and expansionism under Xi Jinping and pledges to stand against it in coordination with other like-minded democracies. He has even [pledged](#) to appoint a special adviser on human rights, charged with responding to Beijing's violations in Xinjiang and Hong Kong. In the realm of defense as well, he has stated his openness to the acquisition of long-distance strike capabilities to reinforce deterrence against missile attacks and has promised to strengthen Japan's "economic security" as well. He has finally [echoed](#) the concerns expressed by senior defense officials about tensions in the Taiwan strait and their substantial impact on Japan's own security.

In short, Kishida seems to have followed Tokyo's general drift toward a more assertive posture toward China. As was the [case](#) for his predecessor, Suga Yoshihide, who had taken a similar trajectory, the question arises whether this reflects a genuine evolution of his vision of foreign policy or if he is simply bending with the prevailing winds among the Japanese political elites. There is no doubt, at least, that Kishida's conversion to hawkishness was electorally useful. It reassured Abe and other LDP elders who mistrusted his main rival, Kono Taro, for his independent streak and for his supposed dovishness toward China. It also probably helped secure a last minute [agreement](#) with Takaichi Sanae, the most hardline of the four candidates to the party presidency, to join hands in preventing a Kono victory in a possible second round run-off.

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In fact, if a [debate](#) held before the election at the national press club is anything to go by, the China policy of Kishida and Kono did not appear so far apart. Both pledged to work with allies and partners and expressed their apprehensions about China's assertiveness. Both also stressed, however, that security tensions were not the whole sum of Sino-Japanese relations, that maintaining diplomatic dialogue remains crucial, and that efforts should be made to restart official meetings and people to people exchanges after the interruption imposed by the pandemic.

In other words, having both served as foreign minister in the Abe administration, Kishida and Kono unsurprisingly endorsed its basic approach. Their more hawkish tone of late – unlike Kishida, Kono has also [expressed](#) openness to the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines, whose main purpose would be balancing against China's rise in the Indo-Pacific – reflects the general unease towards the CCP's trajectory under Xi Jinping, as well as the eclipse in Tokyo of more dovish voices such as the now-former LDP General-Secretary Nikai Toshihiro, whose fortunes had become linked to those of the ill-fated Suga administration.

There is also no denying the long-term shift toward animosity against China within Japan's ruling party, which is reflected in Kishida's own trajectory. In the 2000s, the idea that a stronger China would pose a threat to Japan was gaining ground, but it was still possible to call for more nuance and stress the opportunities offered by China's rise. Following the 2010 and 2012 crises surrounding the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, then-foreign minister Kishida could do little more than advocate a resumption of diplomatic dialogue with Beijing while following Abe's lead in strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance and trying to form an international coalition to confront the "China challenge".

This year, it was necessary for Kishida to pose as a China hawk in order to seize leadership of the LDP. This is a clear indication that the nationalist right now holds sway within the party. Only time will tell whether Kishida will preside over a more systematic and deliberate rethink of Japan's China strategy to reflect this.

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P.S.

• Tokyo Review. Posted on October 6, 2021 :

<https://www.tokyoreview.net/2021/10/japans-new-prime-minister-from-china-dove-to-china-hawk/>