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THE PENINSULA

Japan's Leadership Elections and the Future of Korea-Japan

Relations

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The visit by Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio to South Korea [earlier this month](#) created a few ripples. No major announcements were made, and the two leaders pledged to continue efforts to bolster ties. In South Korea, the opposition Democratic Party [issued](#) a somewhat ritual denunciation of the Yoon Suk-yeol government for “undermining national interest with a subservient diplomacy toward Japan.”

Why, then, did this visit take place? Most analysts pointed to Kishida's desire to cement his legacy following his decision not to run for re-election as president of the ruling conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Kishida's decision to step aside created an unprecedentedly crowded race to select a new party leader who would become prime minister. [Nine candidates](#) are competing for the vote on September 27, which includes a first round of votes among registered party members, followed by a runoff between the top two finishers—only LDP members in the legislative National Diet participate, along with one vote from each of the 47 prefectural chapters.

Looking closely at the intense contest, there is another explanation for the Seoul summit. Kishida may be genuinely concerned about the durability of the progress he made in Korea-Japan relations.

The Absence of South Korea

The LDP race has been naturally focused on domestic issues, from the problem of political corruption and reform to broad macroeconomic policy. Foreign and security policies have been, at most, a secondary issue in the policy platforms of the candidates and in the primary debates.

But even acknowledging the domestic focus, it is notable that there is no mention of South Korea or the importance of Kishida's efforts to improve bilateral relations in any candidate's platform. Ironically, perhaps, only North Korea comes up in candidates' statements, with obligatory pledges to try to resolve the issue of Japanese abductees by the North Korean regime. Koizumi Shinjiro, one of the candidates in the election and the son of the former prime minister who visited North Korea in the early 2000s, declared his readiness to hold a summit with Kim Jong-un without any preconditions.

The lack of focus on South Korea may not necessarily portend a downturn in relations after the change in leadership. Former US national security official Michael Green argued earlier this spring, in a JoongAng Ilbo column anticipating Kishida's departure, that the momentum in improved relations would likely persist despite political change, not only in Japan but even in Korea. He pointed to a consensus among Japanese strategists that relations were essential for Japan's own national security. Green believes that the most likely successors had "no reason to interrupt the progress being made with Korea."

Certainly, some of the candidates are wedded to a continuation of Kishida's foreign and security policies. Most prominent are candidates with the most experience in dealing with foreign policy—Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yoko, LDP Secretary General and former Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu, former Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa, and former Foreign Minister Kono Taro.

If current Japanese polling is to be believed, however, none of these candidates are likely to make the runoff. Polls show the three most likely candidates, along with a fourth who is a longer shot. The three are Koizumi, the youngest and least experienced candidate; Ishiba Shigeru, former defense minister and a perennial contender who has public support but less from party bosses and parliamentarians; and Economic Security Minister Takaichi Sanae, the most hardline right-wing figure in the race and a close supporter of the late Prime Minister Abe Shinzo. The dark horse, also hailing from the Abe faction, is former Economic Security Minister Kobayashi Takayuki.

The Dangers Ahead

Among these, the choices with the most likely negative implications for Korea-Japan relations are Koizumi and Takaichi. Both are regular visitors to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine, visits that routinely create ire in Korea and draw official protests. Koizumi, who is following in the footsteps of his father in this regard, has indicated he will continue this practice as prime minister. Takaichi, who visited the shrine on August 15 as a cabinet minister, has also clearly stated her intention to visit as Japan's leader.

Koizumi is somewhat of an enigma when it comes to foreign policy. His platform contains broad and vague statements on the importance of "strong diplomacy," moving ahead on defense spending, strengthening the US-Japan alliance and security coordination with "like minded countries like Australia," and support for a "free and open Indo-Pacific." Koizumi calls for summit-level dialogue with China and North Korea—again with no mention of South Korea. Koizumi is considered an internationalist, as he has studied in the United

States and worked with Mike Green briefly at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC. But other than a brief stint as environment minister, he has no government experience.

In contrast, the views of Takaichi, who would be Japan's first female leader if elected, are better known. She is a member of Nippon Kaigi, the well-known grouping of right-wing conservatives with strong revisionist views on issues of wartime history. She has challenged the [Kono statement on comfort women](#), raising questions regarding its accuracy in admitting the Imperial Japanese Army's role in coercing Korean and other women into sexual servitude during the war. At the time of President Yoon's election, she opposed Kishida's [attendance](#) at his inauguration.

Takaichi has been more careful lately and has been supportive of efforts to improve relations. "We have built an extremely good relationship," Takaichi [said](#) when announcing her candidacy on September 9. "Prime Minister Kishida has made a great deal of effort. Given that the security environment is said to be the worst in the world, Japan, the United States and South Korea should strengthen their security ties." However, Takaichi, in a somewhat subtly critical comment, added, "In recent years, Japanese music has been able to be broadcast freely in Korea. I am pleased that nostalgic Showa era songs are popular in Korea. We will deepen our cooperation in areas where we can do so."

Perhaps the most potentially positive choice for Korea-Japan relations would be Ishiba, who has a reputation as a defense hawk but is also the most willing to take positions opposed to that of former Prime Minister Abe. Some consider him a De Gaulle-style nationalist who is willing to take stances independent of the United States and more interested in engaging with Asia. In this campaign, he has [called](#) for the creation of an Asian collective security organization and stressed the need to improve ties with China.

On South Korea, Ishiba has been much more forthright about acknowledging Japan's colonial mistake and supportive of closer ties. "It is of utmost importance now for Japan to build a solid relationship of trust with South Korea," he said in a [December 2023 interview](#).

Ishiba departs from conservative views in believing that the annexation of Korea in 1910 was illegitimate. "There's no need to flatter Korea or to lay out the logic of the past, but we should admit that what was a mistake was a mistake," he said. "We must redouble our emphasis on the fact that it is vital for this region that Japan and South Korea understand one another and cooperate."

Concluding Thoughts

At this point, the future of Korea-Japan relations is uncertain. While there are powerful forces in favor of continuity, there is serious potential for a step backward, if not a return to the dysfunction of the past. Japan's leadership election has now become an added and significant factor for uncertainty. The election of a candidate such as Takaichi, who will feed the perception that Japan opposes reconciliation on wartime and colonial history issues, is likely to undermine the progress made by President Yoon and feed those within South Korea who are critical of his conciliatory approach to Japan.

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Photo from the [Prime Minister's Office of Japan](#).

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