



By Ben Rowse

China Watching Leadership Tussle Within Japan's Ruling Party for Policy Recalibration

With Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's third term as president of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) expiring in September 2021, China will be keeping a close eye on the political machinations that could determine whether his successor recalibrates Japan's approach to its historical rival.

In spite of the pro-Taiwan leanings of the family's political dynasty, Abe has sought to balance the pro- and anti-China factions with the LDP since becoming prime minister for the second time in 2012. Last June, amid simmering tensions over the two countries' wartime history and territorial issues—and possibly with an eye on his legacy in the light of his failure to revise Japan's pacifist constitution—Abe extended an invitation to President Xi Jinping to visit Tokyo in April.

That visit, which would have been the first by a Chinese head of state since 2008, was postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Following strong criticism by hawks within the LDP of China's growing political assertiveness and, more recently, Beijing's enactment of strict national security legislation in Hong Kong, the chances of a state visit happening before the next general elections—which must be called by October 2021—mirror Abe's own declining political fortunes.

Abe's odds of securing an unprecedented fourth term as LDP head were dealt a near-fatal blow by his government's missteps in handling the pandemic and a vote-buying scandal that recently toppled a former justice minister. Seemingly on the political ropes, interest within the LDP has now shifted to paving the way for his successor, who, in the absence of a unified political opposition to a party that has been in power almost continuously since 1955, will inevitably become the next prime minister.

One of two prospective front-runners is Fumio Kishida, chairperson of the LDP's Policy Research Council and former foreign minister. The other is Shigeru Ishiba, who ran unsuccessfully against Abe in 2012 and then again six years later. Where Kishida is considered a dove on China, Ishiba has been publicly outspoken against the communist nation. On July 3, Ishiba lambasted Beijing for abrogating Hong Kong's autonomy, saying it was a slap in the face for those who had argued that economic growth would usher in democratic reforms in China.

In a country that is often reticent about voicing its deep-seated distrust of China for fear of being

accused of recidivism, Ishiba's willingness to challenge Beijing has, thus far, played well with voters. In a nationwide *Kyodo News* telephone poll on June 20 and 21, Ishiba was the top choice for the next prime minister, with 23.6% of respondents favoring him. Abe himself placed second, with 14.2%, while Kishida scored just 3.3%.

Still, party factions essentially choose LDP presidents (and thus, prime ministers), not opinion polls. Kishida can expect support from his own faction and from the pro-Abe (and largest) faction controlled by Hiroyuki Hosoda, as well as that headed by Taro Aso, Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister. These three cliques account for nearly half of the party's 410 Diet members. Ishiba's faction has just 19 members, one short of the 20 needed to nominate a candidate for the party's presidency, so he would need help from another faction just to secure his name on the ballot.

Given Kishida's power base, Ishiba will need backing from the faction of LDP Secretary-General Toshihiro Nikai, its octogenarian power broker and holder of the second most powerful position in the party. Ishiba appears to already have him onside. Nikai, who once encouraged Abe to serve a fourth straight term as LDP president, has accepted an invitation to speak at a fund-raising event that Ishiba has planned for this September.

How this blossoming 'affair' of convenience plays out with an electorate suspicious of China's global ambitions remains to be seen, as Nikai has long been considered overly friendly to Beijing. Mentored by the late Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka, who restored Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations in 1972, Nikai has led several high-profile delegations to China and met with successive Chinese presidents, including Xi. When the LDP's two foreign policy committees adopted the resolution urging Abe to withdraw the state visit invitation to Xi, Nikai cautioned against taking such a step. Right-wing groups have repeatedly branded him a traitor. Cynics point to an overt indicator of Beijing's approval of Nikai's pro-China stance: The Adventure World theme park in Nikai's constituency of Wakayama prefecture is home to six pandas. Tokyo's Ueno Zoo has just three.

Nikai's support for Ishiba already appears to have come with a price. At a weekly meeting of his faction on July 9, Ishiba urged a rethink of the internal party resolution to withdraw the state visit invitation to Xi, indicating it could have adverse consequences on bilateral relations. Zoos in Ishiba's constituency of Tottori prefecture may soon start readying their panda pens.

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