

# MP-IDSA

## *Issue Brief*

# Profiling Japan's New Prime Minister

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## **S***ummary*

On 27 September 2024, Shigeru Ishiba, a staunch internal critic of his party, overturned expectations to become the 102nd Prime Minister of Japan. A perennial 'outsider' long considered unelectable, Ishiba comes to the office of Prime Minister with a set of views that mix nuance with outlandishness, especially in the field of defence and foreign policy. At the same time, his domestic challenges, including the rebuilding of public trust after a slush-fund scandal enflamed the public's anger, make his period in office challenging to say the least. As Japan heads to the polls in October in what is sure to be a referendum on the party's internal election, this Brief attempts to profile Japan's new Prime Minister and his prominent policy planks.

## Introduction

The English proverb, ‘Always a bridesmaid, never a bride’, seemed tailor-made to suit the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)’s Shigeru Ishiba, until 27 September 2024, when he was elected to lead the LDP and thus the nation. After five attempts to secure the top position in Japanese politics, Ishiba was increasingly viewed within the party—and by the public—as the perennial outsider. Ishiba himself is said to have believed that only ‘destiny’ could propel him to the leadership of Japan.<sup>1</sup>

The events of 27 September have upturned these perceptions. In a hard-fought contest between a record-breaking nine candidates, votes from the Members of Parliament (Diet) and internal party members were almost tied between Ishiba and Sanae Takaichi, leading to the necessity of a run-off election. After the first round of voting, it was Takaichi who took the lead, with 178 votes versus Ishiba’s 175. However, in a stunning upset in the second round, vote consolidation among several of the other contenders resulted in Ishiba carrying off a 21-vote victory, winning 215 endorsements against Takaichi’s 194.<sup>2</sup>

As he took office as interim Prime Minister on 1 October, Ishiba faces a host of challenges and questions about his past stances and future policies. This Brief places in perspective the likely consequences of his victory in the general elections, which he has stated will be held on 27 October 2024.

## Who is Shigeru Ishiba?

Born in a political family in 1957, Shigeru Ishiba is rooted in the primarily agricultural Tottori Prefecture in the western side of the main island of Honshu. After graduating from the elite Keio University in Tokyo, he worked as a banker before returning to politics in 1983 under the guidance of former Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka. In 1986, he ran for the Diet’s lower house from Tottori Prefecture and became its youngest member at the time.

Initially a member of the agriculture ‘*zoku*’ (‘tribe’, used to refer to members of the Diet interested in particular policy domains), Ishiba quickly developed an interest in foreign policy and defence issues after the 1990 Gulf War. As one of the prominent defectors from the LDP in 1993, he spent the next three years in the opposition benches before returning to the party in 1997.

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<sup>1</sup> Gearoid Reidy, “[Shigeru Ishiba Made His Career as an Anti-Abe](#)”, *The Japan Times*, 29 September 2024.

<sup>2</sup> “[自民党新総裁に石破茂氏 1回目と決選投票の結果詳報](#)” (**Shigeru Ishiba Elected New President, Details of the 1st Round and Runoff Elections**), 日本経済新聞 (*Nihon Keizai Shimbun*), 27 September 2024.

Ishiba’s real debut at the high table of Japanese politics was in 2000, when he became deputy director-general of the then-Japanese Defence Agency (JDA) under Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori. He eventually shepherded the JDA’s transition to a full-fledged ministry in 2007–08 under Yasuo Fukuda, serving as its first Minister of Defence. At that time, his penchant for making outlandish remarks became well-known. For example, he half-jokingly stated that he would mobilise the Self-Defence Forces to fight space alien vessels and the fictional monster Godzilla.<sup>3</sup>

In the 2010s, Ishiba set himself up as a staunch critic of the LDP, but especially of its leader for most of that decade, Shinzo Abe. It is not known how much of the ill-will between the two men was personal, because outwardly both men seemed to have much in common. Both Ishiba and Abe were stated to be members or sympathisers of the *Nippon Kaigi*, an organisation dedicated to rewriting Japan’s 20th century history in a way that whitewashes or minimises its activities during the Second World War. Both men were old-school conservatives with powerful right-wing patrons (Tanaka for Ishiba, Koizumi for Abe). As shall be seen below, even their policy planks seemed to harmonise in some senses.

Yet the fact remains that Ishiba challenged Abe’s leadership of the LDP more times than anyone else’s, campaigning against him in 2014, 2015, 2018 and 2020 (against the Abe-backed Yoshihide Suga). Perhaps the rivalry has more to do with political factors, as Ishiba seems to be staunchly opposed to anyone perceived to be close to Abe even after his death, including former Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso and Sanae Takaichi. Coincidentally, it is this fact that may have led Prime Minister Kishida and other moderates to support him over Takaichi so as to prevent a second takeover of the party by the Abe faction.<sup>4</sup>

## Shigeru Ishiba, the Anti-Abe

Ishiba can best be described as the ‘Anti-Abe’ in that his ideological stances on domestic matters are very much the antithesis of Abe’s deep conservatism.<sup>5</sup> Ishiba is best categorised as a moderate conservative or even right-of-centre on several issues. His positive stances on gender-related social issues such as allowing married women to retain their original surnames and LGBTQ issues are very much at odds with the pole represented by far-right conservatives such as Takaichi or Mio Sugita<sup>6</sup> (a LDP MP who is often lambasted in the media for her comments on Japan’s ethnic

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<sup>3</sup> [“Japan Ready to Tackle Godzilla”](#), *UPI*, 22 December 2007.

<sup>4</sup> [“Former Kishida, Moriyama Factions Rake in Appointments from Ishiba; Motegi Kept at Arm’s Length”](#), *The Yomiuri Shimbun*, 1 October 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Gearoid Reidy, [“Shigeru Ishiba Made His Career as an Anti-Abe”](#), no. 1.

<sup>6</sup> [“Editorial: Lawmaker Mio Sugita Not Fit for the Job, High Time for Her to Go”](#), *The Asahi Shimbun*, 23 September 2023.

and sexual minorities). Yet his characterisation of demonstrators protesting the security legislation introduced by Abe in 2013 as terrorists means that he is not fully on board with the human rights narrative, either.<sup>7</sup>

His views on foreign policy and defence give some cause for concern as well. When North Korea under Kim Jong-un threatened Japan and the United States with nuclear weapons and conducted a nuclear test in defiance of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2087 in 2013, Ishiba claimed that Japan had the right to pre-emptively attack that country. He seems to favour a tougher line with North Korea, which makes it more likely that he will not respond well to Kim’s provocations in future.

On the Taiwan issue, Ishiba has continuously claimed to be in favour of Taiwanese democracy. However, he has continued to espouse diplomatic engagement with China and sought a greater understanding of China’s position on territorial and other security issues. Simultaneously, as a commentator notes,

[h]e notes China has refrained from using its navy to press territorial claims near Japan. Instead, it has militarised its coast guard so Japan’s coast guard ships are now outgunned. But...China has slyly kept the firepower just under the threshold so, by international law, Japan is not able to counter with naval assets.<sup>8</sup>

It is this worldview which has led him to espouse the idea of an ‘Asian NATO’ which he claims is imperative to deter China.<sup>9</sup> The proposed security arrangement would involve Japan, the US, Australia, Canada, the Philippines, India, France, Germany, the United Kingdom and South Korea. He further elaborates that the agreement would lead to the deployment of the Self-Defence Forces overseas, especially to Guam. Bizarrely, unlike the European NATO, he has previously claimed that China should be *a part of* this arrangement that he envisions as a ‘mechanism for peace’.<sup>10</sup>

On the topic of relations with the United States, Ishiba again shows a strange mixture of nuance and outlandishness. While appreciating the role played by the US military in the defence of Japan, he is open in his understanding that Japan must adopt an independent foreign policy that does not blindly follow Washington’s dictates. He offers two primary reasons for this. Firstly, the flux in American politics implies that policy positions taken by one administration could be overturned by the next.

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<sup>7</sup> Ayako Mie, “[Secrecy Law Protests 'Act of Terrorism': LDP Secretary-General](#)”, *The Japan Times*, 1 December 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Lefteris Kafatos, “[Ishiba Shigeru: The LDP’s Most Popular Outcast](#)”, *The Japan Lens*, 22 July 2024.

<sup>9</sup> “[Ishiba Advocates Creation of ‘Asian Version of NATO,’ Equality in SOFA](#)”, *The Asahi Shimbun*, 11 September 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Shigeru Ishiba, “[Shigeru Ishiba on Japan’s New Security Era: The Future of Japan’s Foreign Policy](#)”, Commentary, The Hudson Institute, 25 September 2024; Lefteris Kafatos, “[Ishiba Shigeru: The LDP’s Most Popular Outcast](#)”, no. 8.

Secondly, while US commitments to defend the Japanese mainland may be clear, its studied silence on the Senkakus and other outlying islands implies that it may not intervene in a struggle over them, thus necessitating an indigenous military capability all the way up to and including a nuclear response. As a result, Ishiba, akin to Abe, claims that Japan must maintain its indigenous civilian nuclear infrastructure in order to maintain a latent nuclear weapon capability while encouraging the return of US nuclear weapons to the region.<sup>11</sup>

It is in terms of his views on historical issues between Japan and its neighbours that Ishiba is at his most radical. Unlike Abe and his acolytes, Ishiba has been on record as stating that Japan’s failure to admit historical responsibility for its conduct during the war is at the root of most present disputes with South Korea and China, while supporting the unofficial ban on visits by cabinet officials to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine.<sup>12</sup> He has largely agreed with the characterisation of the Japanese army’s actions in Korea and China as severe human rights violations, and has endorsed the much-deplored Murayama Statement of war responsibility issued in 1995, which explicitly admitted that the Imperial Japanese Armed Forces were responsible for war crimes in Asia.<sup>13</sup> Not only that, he has roundly criticised the wartime government for its decision to fight the Pacific War, much to the horror of the far-right which claims that Japan was uniquely virtuous in its conduct of the war.

## Future Challenges

Shigeru Ishiba is a study in contradictions. Simultaneously more and less hawkish than the rest of his party, his statements on domestic and foreign policy planks read like an exercise in injecting maximum nuance into a given issue. At the same time, his years away from the mainstream have lent his views an unpredictable edge that could lead to big embarrassments down the road.

For now, Ishiba’s greatest challenge is winning the general elections which have been announced for 27 October. The contest will be tough, as the public has in recent months consistently voted down prefecture and city-level LDP candidates in a show

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> 日下部元美 (Kusakabe Motomi), “[「ハト派」「四転び五起きの主人公」 韓国メディア、石破氏当選を速報](#)” (“A Dove”, “The Protagonist who Falls Only to Rise Again”: How South Korean Media Reported Mr. Ishiba’s Selection”), 毎日新聞 (Mainichi Shimbun), 27 September 2024.

<sup>13</sup> “[「戦後50周年の終戦記念日にあたって」\(いわゆる村山談話\)](#)” (Statement by Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama "On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the war's end"), 外務省 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan), 15 August 1995; “[高市氏「発言慎む」村山談話巡り](#)” (Takaichi: ‘No Comment’ on Statement Concerning Murayama Statement”), 日本経済新聞 (Nihon Keizai Shimbun), 14 May 2013.

of anger against the scandal-ridden party. Though Ishiba himself has a clean image and is well-liked, legislators from the LDP are sure to have a tougher time convincing electors. The situation is thus ripe for unpredictable electoral outcomes, though Ishiba personally may manage to appeal to enough voters to avert some extreme situations.

Far more challenging will be the prospect of his return to power with a clear mandate. Campaigning on a platform of tax hikes on corporations and an ‘absolute commitment’ to halt population decline, Ishiba will find it difficult to convince powerful constituencies that he would take care of their interests, which may stymie cooperation on key policy pronouncements after his re-election.

Internally within the party, Ishiba’s selection of loyalists and supporters to his Cabinet has created a visible rift between the far-right and the centre-right. Especially galling to these sections is the appointment to the Cabinet of Seiichiro Murakami, who caused outrage when he called Abe a ‘traitor’ (国賊, *kokuzoku*, lit. seller-out of the country) after the former Prime Minister’s assassination in 2022.<sup>14</sup> Several members of this ideological element, such as Takaichi and Takayuki Kobayashi, have since rejected high-ranking positions within the party (a customary offer extended to all internal party opponents after a leadership race), indicating the depth of the fault line. As such, it is an open question whether the party would remain united enough to run in the national elections under Ishiba.

Challenges to his premiership may come from the Japan Self-Defence Forces (JSDF) as well. Though a self-professed ‘military geek’<sup>15</sup> (軍事オタク, *gunji otaku*) who claims to have detailed knowledge of weapons platforms and legal issues relating to militaries, his appointment to the premiership has been met by visible disappointment, verging on consternation, by both serving and retired military officials.<sup>16</sup> Though none have come out to criticise his appointment publicly, there is a palpable sense that he remains controversial at the Ministry of Defence, due mostly to his tenure in the initial days of its creation. Should he return to power and propose major security policies that the Self-Defence Forces perceive as inimical to their interests, the stage could well be set for a clash between them and the Prime Minister. Newly-appointed Defence Minister Gen Nakatani, a former Ground Self-Defence

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<sup>14</sup> “[「安倍元首相は国賊」発言で処分 村上誠一郎氏が19年ぶり入閣 旧安倍派「リベラルに天下取られた」と嘆き](#)” (Murakami Seiichiro, who Called Former PM Abe a ‘Traitor’, Returns to Cabinet after 19 Years; Former Abe Faction Members Lament that ‘Liberals Have Taken Over the Party’), 東京新聞 (Tokyo Shimbun), 1 October 2024.

<sup>15</sup> “[“Defence ‘Geek’ Ishiba Becomes Japan PM in ‘Severe’ Security Environment”](#)”, Channel NewsAsia, 1 October 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Tomohiko Taniguchi, “[Shigeru Ishiba’s Tenure as Prime Minister Could be Short-lived](#)”, *The Japan Times*, 30 September 2024. This author’s interactions with certain retired senior officials also bore out this impression.

Force general, would then have to exert himself in order to mediate friction between the two sides.

Challenges also await new Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya, as Ishiba’s positions on foreign policy may require desperate measures to keep Japan’s partners and allies on its side. The most controversial of these positions is undoubtedly the ‘Asian NATO’, which has been summarily dismissed by the US Department of State as well as by Indian Minister of External Affairs Dr S. Jaishankar as an impractical ‘fantasy’.<sup>17</sup> If Ishiba continues to insist on implementing this idea, Japan–India relations in particular would be significantly negatively affected, as would relations with several other key states.

The same condition would apply to his desire for ‘renegotiating’ the SOFA, as that would imply the redeployment of JSDF personnel overseas 80 years after the Imperial Japanese forces returned home. Needless to say, such a development would be negatively perceived not only in South Korea or China, but also by Pacific Island states, who suffered under Japanese rule during the Second World War. Sure-footed alliance management and diplomacy is thus needed to ensure that the new Prime Minister’s idiosyncratic worldview does not redound to Japan’s detriment.

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<sup>17</sup> Ken Moriyasu, [“Asian NATO Proposal by Japan's Ishiba Seen as 'Fantasy' in U.S.”](#), *Nikkei Asia*, 17 September 2024; Sriram Lakshman, [“India Does Not Share Japanese PM Shigeru Ishiba’s View of ‘Asian NATO’, Says Jaishankar”](#), *The Hindu*, 1 October 2024.

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