

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

Japan's Diplomacy in 2024: An Assessment

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S*ummary*

In 2025, Japan will have to navigate adroitly the incoming Trump administration's policy positions while attempting to stabilise ties with China, while dealing with a Tokyo–Seoul relationship effectively reset to zero.

Japan entered into 2024 with the tragic New Year’s Day earthquake in the Noto Peninsula in Ishikawa Prefecture. The year’s end, meanwhile, sees Japan led by a weakened prime minister standing at the head of a minority government derived from a hasty and ill-planned electoral transition. Japan also has to contend with domestic turbulence in key regional countries such as the Republic of Korea as well as in its staunch security ally, the United States.

Soft Power Successes

To be sure, Japanese cultural diplomacy in 2024 marked significant milestones at the international high table. The successful recognition by the United Nations Economic, Social and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) of the Sado Island Gold Mines as a World Heritage Site in July 2024 after the Republic of Korea’s withdrawal of its long-standing objection was significant.¹ This was followed by the inclusion of traditional *sake*-making techniques in the Intangible Cultural Heritage list in December.² The award of the Nobel Peace Prize to the Japanese Association of Atomic and Hydrogen Bomb Sufferers (known by their Japanese acronym *Nihon Hidankyo*) in October drew global attention once again to the plight of the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.³

Popular culture also saw Japan notch significant successes on its belt. *The Boy and the Heron*, an animated feature film by legendary director Hayao Miyazaki, won Best Animated Feature at the prestigious 96th Academy Awards in 2024.⁴ In the television domain, historical drama *Shogun* swept the Emmy awards in September with 18 wins, including record-setting wins by lead actor Hiroyuki Sanada and lead actress Anna Sawai.⁵ Audiences worldwide were reminded anew of the power of Japanese storytelling, especially the genre of anime, as a vehicle for conveying Japan’s unique perspectives on the world.

As reported widely, the country was visited by over 33 million tourists during the year, well over double the highest number of visitors previously recorded.⁶ Though not all this tourism was driven by positive impressions of Japanese culture (the cheap yen had a large role to play), and not all of the visitors have been well-

¹ [“UNESCO Adds Japan’s Sado Mine Site to World Heritage List”](#), *Kyodo News*, 27 July 2024.

² [“Japan Sake-brewing Added to UNESCO Intangible Heritage”](#), *Kyodo News*, 5 December 2024.

³ [“The Nobel Peace Prize - Announcement”](#), The Nobel Prize Committee, 11 October 2024.

⁴ Aditi Srivastava, [“The Boy and the Heron Wins Oscars: Where to Watch Hayao Miyazaki’s Last Animated Feature”](#), *Hindustan Times*, 11 March 2024.

⁵ Yuri Kageyama, [“Japan Celebrates Record Emmy Wins for ‘Shogun’”](#), *Associated Press*, 17 September 2024.

⁶ [“最新情報 訪日外客数および出国日本人数” \(Latest Figures: Foreign Visitors to Japan and Japanese Travellers Abroad\)](#), 日本の観光統計データ (Japan Tourism Statistics), 日本政府観光局 (Japan National Tourism Organisation).

managed (with Kyoto and Osaka in particular instituting measures to curb overtourism), it would not be an exaggeration to say that Japan had a very high profile year.

Building New Alliances

Under Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, Japan to its credit parlayed its goodwill well in the first half of the year, by building a host of new alliances and partnerships. On 19 February, it hosted a landmark Japan–Ukraine Conference for Reconstruction, which sought to reassure that war-torn country of its long-term support as an ‘investment in the future’.⁷ Later in April, Japan participated in a new trilateral grouping which also saw the participation of the US and the Philippines, with the three countries agreeing to bolster the Southeast Asian country’s defensive capabilities in light of constant provocation by China in the South China Sea.⁸ The first year of the operation of the new Official Security Assistance programme also saw Japan helping build up maritime domain awareness capabilities in the South China Sea in partnership with the Philippines and Malaysia.

However, the transition from Fumio Kishida to Shigeru Ishiba saw Japan’s alliance-building instincts go awry. The new prime minister, a political maverick who was once deemed ‘unelectable’, saw fit in his initial policy remarks to lay much emphasis on misguided plans to construct an ‘Asian NATO’, which he argued would serve the same function as the original North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The new organisation would comprise almost all the Southeast Asian states along with the ROK, Australia, the US and India.⁹

Despite clear comments by India’s foreign policy establishment expressing their disinterest in joining such a grouping, and indeed the chary attitude expressed by high officials in Washington, the fact that the Liberal Democratic Party’s Foreign Policy and Security Committee is still in ‘discussions’ over the proposal indicates that the plan has not completely gone away.¹⁰ Whether and how this plan ever sees the light of day is an open question, but it is certain that any such agreement will not see participation by most major countries within the region.

⁷ [“Japan-Ukraine Conference for Promotion of Economic Growth and Reconstruction”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 19 February 2024.

⁸ [“Joint Vision Statement from the Leaders of Japan, the Philippines, and the United States”](#), The White House, 11 April 2024.

⁹ Arnab Dasgupta, [“Profiling Japan’s New Prime Minister”](#), Issue Brief, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), 8 October 2024.

¹⁰ [“LDP Committee Starts Discussions on Ishiba’s Vision of an Asian NATO; Some Party Members Reluctant to Support Measure”](#), *The Japan News by the Yomiuri Shimbun*, 29 November 2024.

Neighbourhood Diplomacy

It is in the East Asian neighbourhood that Japanese diplomacy met its most daunting challenge yet in 2024. Its neighbours, as well as its resident security treaty ally, the US, proved to be the source of much uncertainty throughout the year. Ties with China went through a rapid downswing in the earlier half of the year. The first airspace violation by a Chinese aircraft in August was coupled with joint Chinese and Russian exercises near Japanese waters throughout the summer, as well as the Chinese aircraft carrier *Liaoning*'s provocative passage through the Miyako Straits in October.¹¹

Within China, the Japanese expatriate community found itself victim to a sense of personal insecurity after attacks on Japanese children occurred in Suzhou in July and in Shenzhen in September.¹² In the Shenzhen incident, a 10-year-old schoolboy was killed. China's unofficial ban on Japanese fisheries also continued hand-in-hand with a social media smear campaign designed to demonise Japan, though a meeting between Kishida and Chinese Prime Minister Li Qiang on 26 May saw the green shoots of a breakthrough on this front.¹³

As Kishida was replaced by Ishiba, China seemed to signal a change of tack. This signalling took the form of a rare Chinese admission of ‘unexpected’ circumstances behind the airspace violation, as well as an agreement to withdraw a hydrographic buoy placed uncomfortably close to Japanese waters off the coast of Okinawa.¹⁴ President Xi Jinping also consented to meet Prime Minister Ishiba in Peru in November, and the bilateral summit brought about an in-principle agreement to withdraw the fisheries ban in exchange for China's active participation in monitoring the discharge of treated water from the crippled Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant.¹⁵ Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya followed up on the leader-level rapprochement by meeting Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on 25 December.¹⁶ The restart between the two sides indicates a return to Japan's long-standing policy of delinking security concerns from broader ties.

¹¹ [“China Says ‘Unexpected Obstruction’ Led to Aug. Japan Airspace Breach”](#), *Kyodo News*, 2 November 2024; [“China Says Carrier Accused of Entering Japanese Waters was on Routine Training”](#), *Reuters*, 19 September 2024.

¹² Yohei Kobayakawa, [“Japanese Mom, Child Injured in School Bus Knife Attack in Suzhou”](#), *The Asahi Shimbun*, 25 June 2024; [“Japanese Boy in China Dies After Knife Attack; Expats Shaken”](#), *The Asahi Shimbun*, 19 September 2024.

¹³ [“Japan-China Summit Meeting”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 26 May 2024.

¹⁴ “China says...”, *Kyodo News*; [“中国、尖閣沖ブイ移動意向 EEZ外へ 水面下で伝達 日本は即時撤去要求” \(China decides to move buoy off Senkaku islands to outside EEZ; Japan demanded immediate removal\)](#), *沖縄タイムス (Okinawa Times)*, 24 November 2024.

¹⁵ [“Japan-China Summit Meeting”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 15 November 2024.

¹⁶ [“Japan-China Foreign Ministers’ Meeting and Working Lunch”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 25 December 2024.

The US also served to put a crimp in Japanese diplomacy, especially in the later half of the year. Despite strong defence ties marked by a host of joint exercises, information-sharing drills and security talks, Japan and the US remained on different pages on several key matters, including cybersecurity and responses to Israel’s ongoing action in Gaza. A further, needless irritant in the relationship was introduced by the unexpected resistance encountered by Japanese steel giant Nippon Steel as it strove to buy out the US national steelmaker US Steel.¹⁷

Yet the biggest dent was no doubt caused by the unprecedented second coming of former President Donald Trump to the White House in November. In a sign of things to come, while the new President-elect met many world leaders at Mar-a-Lago after his victory, Ishiba alone was informed that a meeting at this time would be ‘inappropriate’. It was only after Trump met Akie Abe, widow of Shinzo Abe, on 8 December, and more importantly, Masayoshi Son, billionaire founder of Softbank, who agreed to make significant investments in the US, that he proclaimed that he ‘would love to meet’ the Japanese prime minister.¹⁸

The Republic of Korea was a bright spot in the Japanese diplomatic firmament in 2024. Prime Minister Kishida met President Yoon Suk-yeol several times throughout the year, and the 6 September bilateral summit was believed to be quite successful. However, Yoon’s decision to attempt an ill-considered coup d’état on the night of 4 December upended all the best-laid plans. The coup failed, Yoon was summarily impeached and Prime Minister Han Duck-soo took over as interim president. Japan has since maintained anxious contact with counterparts in Seoul.¹⁹ It is almost certain that the now-inevitable general elections will bring a progressive president back to the Blue House, who will be hard-pressed to continue the forward-looking stance adopted by Yoon during his time in power. The language of the impeachment motion introduced by opponents of Yoon, mentioning specifically his ostensible kowtowing to Japan, is a worrying portent of their behaviour in power.

¹⁷ [“Video: Why Nippon Steel Wants to Buy U.S. Steel”](#), *Nikkei Asia*, 20 December 2024.

¹⁸ [“トランプ氏、石破首相との会談を見送り…就任まで外国首脳に会わない方針で「例外認めない」”](#) (Trump postpones meeting with Ishiba, says “no exceptions to rule prohibiting meetings with world leaders before inauguration), *読売新聞 (Yomiuri Shimbun)*, 16 November 2024; [“トランプ氏、石破総理とも「ぜひ会いたい」 大統領就任前も「望むなら」”](#) (Trump: ‘Would like to meet’ PM Ishiba, before inauguration ‘if he wishes to’), *テレ朝ニュース (TV Asahi News)*, 17 December 2024.

¹⁹ [“Japan Vigilant After South Korea’s Martial Law Sows Chaos”](#), *Kyodo News*, 4 December 2024.

Conclusion

In 2025, Japan will have to navigate adroitly the incoming Trump administration’s policy positions while attempting to stabilise ties with China. It must do all this while dealing with a Tokyo–Seoul relationship effectively reset to zero.

The domestic situation serves to complicate matters further. As the head of a minority government that must depend on opposition parties to survive, Prime Minister Ishiba must convince all sides of the necessity of continuing to raise defence funding through tax hikes while aiming to pass the Budget for FY2025. The House of Councillors, Japan’s Upper House, also goes to the polls in the summer of 2025. Given the depth of the outrage Japanese voters showed towards the LDP in the Lower House polls, there is a very high probability that Ishiba may not survive a further rout.

Given this situation, what can we expect from Japan going forward? Firstly, it is highly likely that its ties with India are liable to be put on the backburner, as diplomatic brainpower is directed to solving knotty problems with China and the US. Secondly, it is unclear whether Ishiba will continue the outreach to the Global South so actively pursued by Kishida in his time in office, though vestiges of those ties may continue.

Thirdly, defence ties with several countries are likely to suffer, as the planned income tax hike envisaged in fiscal 2025 has been pushed back to fiscal 2026 or later, essentially deferring Japanese defence preparedness to the near future. As most opposition parties, as well as the LDP’s junior partner Komeito, espouse pacifistic, dovish policies towards defence, it is unclear whether the tax hikes will ever fructify. To borrow a seafaring metaphor, Japan’s diplomacy needs all hands on deck to swiftly ride the adverse currents international conditions have brought into being.

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