Comparative Connections Roundtable
Japan’s Elections and its Foreign Relations

November 3, 2021 (US) | November 4, 2021 (Japan)

Featuring

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About This Session
On Nov. 3, 2021, Pacific Forum organized the Comparative Connections Roundtable that discussed the recent elections in Japan and their impact on regional partnerships, particularly with ASEAN member states in Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific region. The session was moderated by Brad Glosserman (Pacific Forum/Tama University), and featured Dr. June Teufel Dreyer (University of Miami), Dr. Kei Koga (Nanyang Technological University), and Dr. Sheila Smith (Council on Foreign Relations). The following are the key findings from the session.

Key Findings

The Elections, Fumio Kishida, and the LDP
With the onset of new security dilemmas and concerns over China’s influence in the Asia-Pacific, military capabilities and defense budget issues assumed center stage in the recent Japan elections. However, the
question of expanding Japanese hard power remains a highly politicized and controversial topic. Former Abe cabinet holder and member of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Takaichi Sanae was a conservative candidate who turned media attention to the LDP onto the question of Japanese hard power. The election prompted the Japanese people to think about Japan’s geostrategic position, how to strengthen Japan’s military capabilities, and what kind of challenging defense decisions the new administration would face. Although Takaichi did not win the race for prime minister, her position on the urgency to revisit Japanese defenses were supported by Former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and the eventual Prime Minister Kishida Fumio.

The LDP experienced significant wins during the election, gaining a total 262 parliamentary seats with a loss of only 15 seats. With this safe majority, the LDP is anticipated to chair the committees in the lower house, essentially running the legislative agenda for Japan’s lower house and setting a foundation for a win in Japan’s upper house election next summer.

As Japan’s new prime minister, Kishida emerged from the election with another notable wins. After the Lower House win, Kishida managed to balance the factional tensions within the LDP. Many senior LDP veterans, notably Secretary General Amari Akira, lost in their single member districts. Moreover, younger LDP Diet members are hoping to loosen the hold of factional leaders on key party positions. Developing greater accountability within the party is seen as one way of opening up debate over the party’s policy agenda for the future. This evidence of generational change also could be found in the Lower House results. With some important veteran lawmakers unable to gain voter confidence, a new group of younger, more technocratically savvy candidates were brought into government. Social issues were also prominent in both the LDP leadership race and the Lower House election as questions of inclusivity, rights for women and for Japan’s LGBT community, were a focal point of campaigning. Japanese society is changing, and so too are the issues that motivate Japan’s identity politics.

Japanese security policy was another topic of interest and difficult questions about Japan’s ability to muster its defenses in a far more sensitive regional environment were front and center. Takaichi Sanae raised the idea of spending 2% of Japan’s GDP on the leadership contest, and her selection as head of the LDP Policy Research Council ahead of the Lower House election ensured it was on the party’s election manifesto. However, this should be seen as aspirational rather than as a practical goal for the new Kishida Cabinet. Nevertheless, there is still a strong consensus on increasing defense spending by the LDP and smaller parties like Komeito, the LDP’s junior coalition partner. Next year we should see a rewrite of the 10-year defense plan, as well as an initial procurement plan that should reflect this commitment to greater military spending.
Japanese Foreign Policy and Taiwan Contingency

Taiwan is a core issue in modern Sino-Japanese relations. Japan has a long history with Taiwan because it was a Japanese colony until the end of World War II. Chiang Kai-shek admired the Japanese military style during WWII and some Japanese troops stayed to help the Nationalists fight the Communists in the Chinese Civil War. The Taiwanese public is split between a small and dwindling minority who want closer ties or reunification with China while others are sympathetic to Japan. With one exception, Taiwanese administrations had strong ties with Japan. One of the most prominent, Lee Teng-hui, angered China by correctly pointing out that he had been a Japanese citizen for the first 20 years of his life. Lee was regarded as more fluent in Japanese than in Mandarin.

Under Ma Ying-jeou’s administration, Taiwan was hostile to Japan. However, Tsai Ing-wen’s administration restored not only restored the status quo ante but built on previous ties. Since her election in 2016, Japan and Taiwan have enhanced both economic and security cooperation.

Recently, Japan has hinted at acknowledgement of Taiwan’s sovereign status on multiple occasions, for example, changing the name of its representative office in Taipei to the Japan-Taiwan Relations Association in 2017, thereby implicitly elevating Taiwan to an equal status, as with other sovereign countries. Japan also invited a Taiwanese cabinet minister to the recent Summer Olympics in Tokyo, which China vigorously protested. In a parliamentary debate, former Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide referred to Taiwan as a “country,” which also angered China. Replying to Chinese protests, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs has repeatedly stated that there has been no change in its position on the one-China Policy.

China’s military rise has brought the strategic importance of Taiwan into sharp focus Chinese warships have recently transited through strategic chokepoints such as the Miyako and Tsugaru straits, albeit not violating international waters. Were China to take over Taiwan, Japanese territorial waters would come perilously close to Japan, its ships could break out of the First Island Chain, and shipping lanes would be affected. As a result, Japan has become a more vocal supporter of defending Taiwan and is wary of a potential Chinese invasion of the island. The Taiwan issue has caused Japan’s relationship vis-à-vis China to deteriorate. China has challenged and questioned Japan on its support for Taiwan, with its media outlets calling Japan a “lackey” of the US. When push comes to shove, it is still unclear to Washington if it could count on Japanese support to defend Taiwan. China has stepped up its rhetoric about unification with the island and in the first few days following is National Day of Oct. 1, the People’s Liberation Army flew more than 57 sorties into Taiwanese airspace. Both Washington and Tokyo criticized these actions. Despite
cool Sino-Japanese relations several factors work against their further escalation. China has made clear that it wants Japanese support for the upcoming Winter Olympics in Beijing and Xi Jinping is thought to want to avoid exacerbating Sino-Japanese tensions in the runup to the Chinese Communist Party’s 20th National Congress in the fall. 2022 will also mark the 50th anniversary of the normalization of Japan-PRC relations, to which Xi appears to attach considerable importance.

The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for a Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) is an important issue for Sino-Japanese trade relations. Both Taiwan and China have requested to join. Japan welcomes China’s request to join as long as it obeys the conditions of the treaty, such as ending subsidies to state-owned enterprises, improved financial transparency and respect for intellectual property rights, which China will find it difficult to agree to. A leading Chinese analyst has described China’s application to join the CPTPP as a curveball for Japan, since Tokyo will have to choose between antagonizing China by saying no or the U.S. by saying yes. Other trade issues have been positive with, for example, Japanese energy companies benefiting from China’s energy crisis by selling Japan’s excess natural gas for high prices.

Southeast Asia, ASEAN, and the Future of Japan Foreign Policy
The LDP and Komeito can claim a resounding victory in the recent election, which will give Prime Minister Kishida more room to pursue his diplomatic vision. This would include maintaining Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision, engaging with the Quad, possibly revising Article 9 of its constitution (which “forever renounce[s] war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes”), and becoming more active in Southeast Asia.

That said, Kishida seems to be a status-quo leader so Japan will not drastically change its current policy. Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu was the person who showed a strong interest in diplomacy with Southeast Asian countries, but now Motegi has become the secretary-general of the Liberal Democratic Party following Amari’s defeat. Therefore, next foreign minister needs to fill that role to maintain strong ties with Southeast Asian countries, but it may take some time to cultivate personal ties with regional counterparts.

Myanmar is currently a key issue for Japan. The February coup presents a potential political challenge for Japan and ASEAN. Japan has expressed supports for democratization in Myanmar and is critical of the coup. Some ASEAN members also have been critical toward Myanmar’s junta because it did not follow through ASEAN’s “five-point consensus.” There is thus a convergence of interests between Japan and some ASEAN member states. However, Japan has been put in a difficult position because if Japan strengthen its
criticism with some ASEAN members, it may further create ASEAN division, which would weaken ASEAN centrality.

China’s increasing influence in Southeast Asia is another important issue in this context. Japan has contributed its defense capacity-building programs and socio-economic development assistance to Southeast Asian countries so that they do not become excessively dependent on China. However, Cambodia and Laos can hardly resist Chinese influence since China has offered to help build infrastructure at cheap prices with less conditionalities through the Belt and Road Initiative. If Myanmar tilts toward China, China would gain a diplomatic tool to drive a wedge between ASEAN member states.

Currently, Japan is primarily focused on the more immediate security issues in Taiwan and North Korea. However, ASEAN is now facing a risk of disunity in the context of China’s rise and Myanmar. The ASEAN members also have different perceptions toward regional strategic issues—for instance, some ASEAN members support AUKUS while other members are more critical. The continuation of this trend would further weaken ASEAN centrality.

Therefore, it is important for the Kishida cabinet to pay more attention to Southeast Asia and clarify its strategy toward the region, particularly the role of ASEAN in Japan’s FOIP vision. If Japan is too reactive to Southeast Asian issues, it will lose credibility and will be seen as a weak player.

Many ASEAN members now view Japan’s presence in the region positively since it is an alternative to both China and the US. ASEAN members do not want to have to pick one side. In this context, Japan can play a crucial role in tipping the balance of power in Southeast Asia away from China.