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US-JAPAN RELATIONS

THE US AND JAPAN BUILD MULTILATERAL MOMENTUM

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2023 brings a renewed focus on the US-Japan partnership as a fulcrum of global and regional diplomacy. With an eye to the [G7 Summit in Hiroshima](#) in mid-May, Prime Minister Kishida Fumio began the year with visits to G7 counterparts in Europe and North America. Later in the spring, he toured Africa in an effort to gain understanding from countries of the Global South. The Joe Biden administration looks ahead to a lively economic agenda, as it [hosts](#) the APEC Summit in November on the heels of the G20 Summit in New Delhi in September. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [laid out in detail](#) the economic ambitions of the Biden national strategy on April 27, giving further clarity to how the administration's foreign policy will meet the needs of the American middle class. Regional collaboration continues to expand. Both leaders will gather in Australia on May 24 as Prime Minister Anthony Albanese [hosts](#) the third in-person meeting of the leaders of the Quad. Also noteworthy in this first quarter of 2023 is the progress in ties between Japan and South Korea.

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Trilateral consultations began early in the Biden administration, and after the election of President Yoon Suk Yeol last spring, the groundwork for resolving the many difficulties in the bilateral relationship began. This spring, President Yoon and Prime Minister Kishida revealed their progress in a set of visits to each other's capitals. A trilateral summit is planned for the G7 Summit, which Yoon will attend as an observer.

Overshadowing this active multilateral calendar is the continuing war in Ukraine. Both Kishida and Biden have visited President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in his capitol. The United States and Japan remain stalwart supporters of the Ukrainian defense effort as Ukrainians prepare for the spring counteroffensive against Russian forces. Yet [questions have arisen](#) within the US Congress over the scale and duration of military aide provided to Zelenskyy. Interestingly, there remains little doubt about the Kishida Cabinet's support of Ukraine. While Japan does not provide lethal aid, it has joined in solidarity with European nations to [contribute](#) to the complex humanitarian relief needed by the Ukrainian people.

Political choices will also shape the remainder of the year. President Biden on April 25 [announced](#) his run for a second term in the 2024 election. The Republican field of candidates begins to emerge with former UN Ambassador Nikki Haley officially [declaring](#) her candidacy on Feb. 14, and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, while not yet official, has been the [center of media attention](#). Former President Donald Trump has already begun his rallies, having [announced](#) his candidacy on Nov. 15. In Tokyo, talk of a national snap election continues, with the latest rumors suggesting that Kishida, coming off his party's good showing in local elections in April, might opt for a ballot after the G7 Summit in Hiroshima.

Prepping for the G7 Summit

Early in the year, Kishida began consultations with other G7 partners for the next summit to be held in Hiroshima from May 17-19. As host, Japan will set the agenda for the meeting, and the prime minister aimed to highlight his home constituency as a gathering place for global leaders. Traveling first to Europe and then to North America, Kishida met the French president and Italian, British, and Canadian prime ministers before his final stop at the White House for talks with Biden. High on the

agenda, of course, was rallying global support for Ukraine. Kishida then [visited](#) Ukraine in March, quietly traveling there from India where he had met with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. While in Kyiv, Kishida pledged to provide additional aid and create a "[Special Global Partnership](#)" between Japan and Ukraine. In addition, he invited President Zelenskyy to speak to the G7 leaders at the summit.



Figure 1 Prime Minister Kishida is preparing for the G7 Summit in Hiroshima, May 17-19. Photo: Kyodo News

There are other aims as well. Notably, Japan intends to highlight the repercussions to the Global South of the war in Ukraine. Kishida [traveled](#) to Africa on a week-long trip beginning April 29 to offer assistance to those suffering from the global hike in food and energy prices caused by the war. Similarly, Tokyo will be looking to engage developing countries to ensure they avoid becoming over-dependent on Chinese largesse. On May 1, during his meeting with Ghanaian President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, Kishida [pledged](#) \$500 million in financial support to Africa.

The Japanese prime minister will have Indo-Pacific security balance on his mind as G7 leaders gather in Japan. As Kishida made clear throughout last year, a similar conflict is easily imaginable in the Indo-Pacific as cross-Strait tensions between China and Taiwan have intensified. Gaining deeper European understanding of the strategic challenges posed by China will be high on his priority list even though some European nations, such as France and Germany, see economic ties with China as indispensable, especially as sanctions on Russia have been costly.

Finally, Kishida will have the opportunity to remind the world of the nuclear risk. Last year, Ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel [represented](#) the United States in visits to peace memorial ceremonies in Hiroshima on Aug. 6 and Nagasaki on Aug. 9. A visit by Biden and other G7 leaders to the Hiroshima Peace Park, and possibly to the Nagasaki Peace Park, will further highlight the consequences of nuclear weapons and provide a platform for global condemnation of the threat to use them again.

US-Japan Regional Cooperation

The Biden and Kishida governments have continued to expand their regional agenda. Striking this spring was progress made in improving trilateral US-Japan-South Korea ties. Security cooperation began in the early months of the Biden administration in 2021 and gained momentum with the election of South Korean President Yoon last year. This year consultations deepened. Foreign ministers met on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference, where the three democracies [restated their joint condemnation](#) of recent North Korean missile tests. Further progress is expected at a trilateral leaders' meeting to be held during the Hiroshima G7 Summit.

Nonetheless, concerns over US extended deterrence in South Korea prompted a significant statement of reassurance during the state visit of President Yoon to Washington in April. Wowing the White House gathering with his rendering of Don McLean's classic song, "American Pie," Yoon also [gained a clear statement](#) of the US commitment to South Korean defenses in the so-called "Washington Declaration." Speaking during a joint press conference in the Rose Garden, Biden said that "a nuclear attack by North Korea against the United States or its allies or partners is [unacceptable](#) and will result in the end of whatever regime to take such an action." In return, Biden received Yoon's reassurance of South Korea's commitment to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Strategic stability on the Korean Peninsula has a significant impact on Japan as well, and North Korean missile tests continued to make it clear that a robust trilateral agenda of security cooperation was all the more necessary. The new [National Defense Plan](#) put forward by Prime Minister Kishida [suggests](#) an early purchase of counterstrike capabilities, ensuring that Japan,

like South Korea, will have its own conventional deterrent. But close coordination between Tokyo, Seoul, and Washington will be indispensable. US Special Representative for the DPRK Sung Kim, Japanese Director-General of the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau Funakoshi Takehiro, and South Korean Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Kim Gunn met in Seoul on April 7 and [called for joint efforts](#) to block North Korea from sending workers abroad and engaging in malicious cyber activities to fund its nuclear program.



Figure 2 US Special Representative for the DPRK Sung Kim, Japanese Director-General of the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau Funakoshi Takehiro, and South Korean Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Kim Gunn hold a trilateral meeting to address North Korean affairs. Photo: Willy Kurniawan/Reuters

Most welcome, of course, has been the accompanying improvements in bilateral ties between Tokyo and Seoul. Washington has been supportive of the bilateral diplomacy that produced first Yoon's [visit](#) to Tokyo on March 16 and then Kishida's [visit](#) to Seoul on May 7. The former produced a Japanese commitment to improve favorable treatment of South Korean companies under the export control laws. Progress made by the Yoon administration on ensuring compensation for the plaintiffs in the Supreme Court forced labor decision has also been a major signal of progress. On April 17, Japan and South Korea [held](#) their first bilateral security dialogue in five years. Finally, Kishida's visit suggested [far greater cooperation](#) on strengthening supply chain resilience and advancing high-tech industries will be coming in the months ahead. President Yoon's attendance at the G7 Summit will provide the opportunity for US-Japan-South Korea leaders to move their agenda forward, with Yoon [hinting](#) in press remarks that the leaders might

use the meeting to form a new trilateral security forum. Media reports also suggest that the three countries hope to reach an agreement on [linking radar systems](#) to better detect North Korean missiles when their defense ministers meet in Singapore in early June.

The US and Japan have continued their cooperation in the Quad. The Quad foreign ministers [met](#) in New Delhi on March 3 in preparation for the leaders' summit [planned](#) for May 24 in Australia. Already, Quad working groups have produced considerable progress across a host of issues. From April 10–14, the US, Japan, Australia, and India hosted the [Quad Cyber Challenge](#), a coordinated campaign to [promote](#) responsible cyber habits across corporations, schools, and individuals in the four nations.

And, the US and Japan are joining with the Philippines to deepen security cooperation. On April 5, Chief Cabinet Secretary Matsuno Hirokazu [announced](#) Japan would begin to offer bilateral Overseas Security Assistance to help smaller Indo-Pacific nations strengthen their defenses. One of the [first candidates](#) will be the Philippines. A month earlier, the Japanese Self-Defense Force (SDF) [participated](#) in the annual US-Philippine Salaknib military exercises as an observer to encourage a more formal role for the Japanese SDF participation in contributing to stability in the South China Sea. This pattern of inviting Japan to join bilateral military exercises with allies proved successful in expanding Japanese security cooperation with Australia and then India in the 2000s, and ultimately to a Quad dialogue on maritime and other regional security needs. Already, media reports [suggest](#) that the US, Japan, and the Philippines are planning to create a trilateral consultative mechanism for their national security advisors.

Politics in the Air

Kishida faced a [series of challenges](#) toward the end of 2022. His decision to host a state funeral for former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo [sparked controversy](#), while [growing public discontent](#) arose over Kishida's management of the LDP's connections with the Unification Church. The resignation of four Cabinet members due to their ties with the church and other scandals [added](#) to the mounting pressure on Kishida's leadership. Some polls even indicated that Kishida's approval rating, which had already been on a [declining trajectory](#), had fallen below

30%, entering the so-called "[danger zone](#)" where prime ministers face the risk of losing office.

But Kishida has seemingly bounced back with the start of 2023. His support rating has steadily climbed, with one *Nikkei* poll in late April finding that support for the prime minister [surpassed 50%](#) for the first time in eight months.

What factors contributed to this successful turnaround in public support? Some of it can likely be attributed to Kishida's vigorous engagement in high-profile diplomacy in the leadup to the G7 Summit in Hiroshima, including visits to [France](#), [Italy](#), [United Kingdom](#), [Canada](#), [United States](#), [India](#), [Ukraine](#), [Poland](#), [Egypt](#), [Ghana](#), [Kenya](#), [Mozambique](#), and [South Korea](#).

Kishida has also benefitted from positive developments on the domestic front. His ruling coalition performed better than anticipated in the unified local elections and parliamentary by-elections held in April. While the LDP and its coalition partner Komeito experienced some setbacks in the two rounds of local elections on April 9 and 23, they [managed to secure victories](#) for most of their preferred candidates. Notably, the regionally based Nippon Ishin no Kai emerged victorious in several races such as the Osaka and Nara gubernatorial contests, demonstrating their [growing influence](#).

However, it was the LDP's better-than-expected performance in the five parliamentary by-elections on April 23 that was particularly significant for the Kishida government. Although Kishida had set a target of winning three out of five seats, LDP-backed candidates exceeded expectations by [securing four victories](#). These by-elections witnessed triumphs by more traditional LDP candidates in party strongholds like Yamaguchi, where Yoshida Shinji claimed the seat previously held by the late former Prime Minister Abe, and Kishi Nobuchiyoshi won the district formerly represented by his father and Abe's brother, Kishi Nobusuke, who resigned due to illness. But these races also [saw the emergence](#) of new types of LDP candidates such as Arfiya Eri, who will become the first Japanese parliamentarian of Uyghur descent.

Support for Kishida further [increased](#) after he [survived](#) an assassination attempt against him

on April 15. While Kishida was delivering a stump speech at a fishing port in Wakayama, an assailant hurled an explosive device at him, but he managed to escape unharmed. The incident evoked memories of the assassination of former Prime Minister Abe, who was shot and killed less than a year ago on July 8, 2022, during an Upper House campaign event in Nara. The attack on Kishida again raised questions about the security measures for Japanese politicians, as well as for world leaders attending the upcoming G7 Summit. Kishida attempted to promptly reassure the public by immediately returning to the campaign trail, declaring, “We are in the middle of an important election for our country. We must carry this on together.”



Figure 3 A man is detained by police after throwing an explosive device towards Prime Minister Kishida, who was unharmed during the incident. Photo: AP

With the upswing in Kishida’s support rating, speculation has arisen about the possibility of a snap election for the Lower House. Kishida must call a new election by October 2025 at the latest when the term for the Lower House expires. While concerns exist that voters may experience election fatigue after the busy month of April, Kishida is likely contemplating the optimal timing to secure victory at the polls and strengthen his position before the LDP’s next party leadership election in September 2024.

Another crucial factor influencing Kishida’s decision on election timing is its impact on support for his policy proposals, particularly in terms of how he plans to pay for them. Kishida has made ambitious pledges to double Japan’s spending on defense and childcare, but specific details have been limited, causing some confusion about the prime minister’s plans for implementation. Opinion polls indicate that the public is not inclined toward new taxes, and Kishida himself has said that he would seek a public mandate through an election before considering any tax hikes.

While Kishida has recently dismissed the possibility of an imminent election, only time will reveal whether this stance changes. Meanwhile, observers will closely monitor the performance of the Kishida administration during the G7 Summit and parliamentary deliberations in June, as it is expected that the government will unveil more information regarding its spending priorities.

As for Biden, his support ratings have largely managed to hold steady at just over 40% through the first few months of the year, but significant challenges lie ahead. As Biden heads to Japan to meet Kishida and world leaders in Hiroshima, domestic concerns will likely be looming large on his mind as the US needs to raise the debt ceiling by June 1 or risk default. The last time the US came within just days of default in 2011, Standard & Poor’s downgraded the country’s top-tier credit rating for the first time. How the Biden administration handles the issue will have substantial implications for the global economy and will also likely continue to be a point of contention as the president seeks reelection in 2024.

What’s Ahead?

The US and Japan have a full diplomatic calendar for the remainder of 2023. Once the G7 is over, the President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida will quickly shift focus to the regional priorities of the Quad. The fall will bring economic priorities to the fore at the G20 and APEC. Close coordination between Tokyo and Washington continues to shape this multilateral emphasis on coping with the global consequences of Moscow’s aggression as well as anticipating steps to mitigate the risk of regional economic strains with Beijing.

Politics will continue to shape expectations of the US-Japan agenda as both Biden and Kishida look to their domestic political calendars. The United States prepares for the presidential election of 2024. With Biden already declared as the Democratic candidate, all attention will be on the Republican field. Gov. DeSantis’ visit to Tokyo to discuss trade and especially his meeting with Prime Minister Kishida brought attention to his position on the US-Japan alliance. DeSantis heartily endorsed the alliance and its importance to the United States, a marked contrast to then-candidate Donald Trump in the 2016 election. With Trump already declared as a candidate, it remains to be seen if

and when other Republicans will join the race, but expect US foreign policy, particularly strategy toward Russia and China, will be a prominent part of the debate.



Figure 4 US presidential hopeful and Florida governor Ron DeSantis visit Prime Minister Kishida in Tokyo.
Photo: Reuters

Prime Minister Kishida has rallied popular support in the early months of 2023. *Nikkei Shimbun* reported in early May a jump to over 50% public approval rate, four points higher than a month earlier and over 10 points higher than late last year. His diplomatic activism has helped, and the G7 Summit is expected to highlight his role as statesman. The world's expectations of him are evident from his photo on the cover of *Time* magazine and praise for his statecraft. But not far from the surface in Japan is the violence that now seems to infuse Japanese politics. Abe's assassination last year has been followed by an attack on Kishida, both conducted during political campaign stops. While Kishida was unharmed, these attacks have left many in Japan unsettled, and while rumors of a snap election filter through political circles in Tokyo, the prime minister will need to consider carefully how the Japanese people feel about yet another election.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-JAPAN RELATIONS

JANUARY—APRIL 2023

Jan. 11, 2023: Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa, and Defense Minister Yasukazu Hamada [hold](#) a US-Japan Security Consultative Committee (2+2) Meeting in Washington, DC. [Joint Statement](#).

Jan. 11, 2023: Secretary Blinken and FM Hayashi [meet](#) on the sidelines of the US-Japan Security Consultative Committee.

Jan. 12, 2023: US and Japan [host](#) fifth Indo-Pacific Business Forum in a hybrid format in Tokyo.

Jan. 13, 2023: President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida [meet](#) in Washington, DC. [Joint Statement](#).

Jan. 13, 2023: Vice-ministerial meeting of the Japan-US Economic Policy Consultative Committee (Economic 2+2) is [held](#) in Washington, DC.

Jan. 13, 2023: US and Japan [sign](#) the US-Japan Space Cooperation Framework Agreement at NASA Headquarters in Washington, DC.

Jan. 27, 2023: Japan and the Netherlands [agree](#) to join the US in barring some shipments of their chip technology to China.

Feb. 8, 2023: US, Japan, Australia, and India [announce](#) the Quad Cyber Challenge.

Feb. 9, 2023: Japan and the US [hold](#) the inaugural US-Japan Strategic Dialogue on Democratic Resilience in Tokyo.

Feb. 13, 2023: Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs Mori Takeo, and South Korean First Vice Minister Cho Hyundong [meet](#) in Washington, DC. [Joint Statement](#).

Feb. 14, 2023: Deputy Secretary Sherman and Vice FM Mori [meet](#) in Washington, DC.

Feb. 18, 2023: G7 Foreign Ministers [meet](#) in Munich, Germany.

Feb. 18, 2023: Secretary of State Blinken, FM Hayashi, and South Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs Park Jin [meet](#) on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference in Germany.

Feb. 20, 2023: Prime Minister Kishida [meets](#) US Congressional Study Group of Japan in Tokyo.

Feb. 21, 2023: FM Hayashi [meets](#) with US Sen. Tammy Duckworth in Tokyo.

Feb. 23, 2023: Newspaper reports [suggest](#) Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. (TSMC) plans to construct a second chipmaking plant in Japan in southwestern Kumamoto.

March 3, 2023: Secretary of State Blinken, FM Hayashi, Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Penny Wong, and Indian Minister of External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar [hold](#) a US-Japan-Australia-India (Quad) Foreign Ministers' Meeting in New Delhi, India.

March 3, 2023: Secretary of State Blinken and FM Hayashi [meet](#) on the sidelines of the US-Japan-Australia-India (Quad) Foreign Ministers' Meeting in New Delhi, India.

March 6-7, 2023: 13th US-Japan Policy Cooperation Dialogue on the Internet Economy is [hosted](#) in hybrid format by the US.

March 13, 2023: Japan [participates](#) as observer for the first time in the annual US-Philippines Salaknib Exercises.

March 14, 2023: Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry [hosts](#) a virtual ministerial meeting of the Major Economies Forum (MEF) on energy and climate.

March 15, 2023: VFM Affairs Mori and Deputy Secretary of State Sherman [speak](#) by telephone.

March 16, 2023: Prime Minister Kishida [meets](#) with Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol in Tokyo.

March 19, 2023: G7 foreign ministers [release](#) a statement on the launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile by North Korea.

March 21-23, 2023: Prime Minister Kishida [visits](#) Ukraine to meet President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

March 28, 2023: Media reports suggest the US, Japan, and Philippines [plan](#) to create a trilateral framework involving their national security advisers.

March 29, 2023: FM Hayashi [meets](#) with Colorado Gov. Jared Polis in Tokyo.

April 5, 2023: Japan [announces](#) it will offer Overseas Security Assistance (OSA) to help countries boost their defenses, with Chief Cabinet Secretary Matsuno Hirokazu [saying](#) the first recipients are likely to include the Philippines, Malaysia, Bangladesh, or Fiji.

April 6, 2023: US, Japan, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand, and Vietnam [release](#) the Japan-US-Mekong Power Partnership (JUMPP) Action Plan at the Friends of the Mekong Senior Officials Meeting in Vientiane.

April 6, 2023: Ground Self-Defense Force helicopter with 10 personnel aboard [crashes](#) into waters near Okinawa.

April 7, 2023: US Special Representative for the DPRK Sung Kim, Japanese Director-General of the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau Takehiro Funakoshi, and South Korean Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Kim Gunn [meet](#) in Seoul.

April 9, 2023: Japan [holds](#) the first round of the unified local elections.

April 10-14, 2023: US, Japan, Australia, and India [hold](#) the Quad Cyber Challenge.

April 14, 2023: Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Ely Ratner, Director General for Defense Policy Masuda Kazuo, and Korean Deputy Minister for National Defense Policy Heo Tae-kun [hold](#) the 13th Defense Trilateral Talks in Washington, DC.

April 15, 2023: A suspect is [arrested](#) after allegedly throwing an explosive device at Prime Minister Kishida in an assassination attempt.

April 16-18, 2023: G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting is [held](#) in Karuizawa, Nagano.

April 17, 2023: FM Hayashi and Secretary Blinken [meet](#) on sidelines of the G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting. [Communique](#).

April 17, 2023: Prime Minister Kishida [meets](#) US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry in Tokyo.

April 17, 2023: Japan and South Korea [hold](#) bilateral security dialogue for the first time in five years.

April 18, 2023: US First Lady Jill Biden [meets](#) Japanese First Lady Kishida Yuko in Washington, DC.

April 18, 2023: Prime Minister Kishida [meets](#) with Secretary of State Blinken in Tokyo.

April 19, 2023: FM Hayashi [meets](#) with US Trade Representative Katherine Tai in Tokyo.

April 23, 2023: Japan [holds](#) second round of the unified local elections and by-elections for five seats in the national Parliament.

April 24, 2023: Prime Minister Kishida [meets](#) Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis in Tokyo.

April 24, 2023: Foreign Minister Hayashi [meets](#) with DeSantis in Tokyo.

April 26, 2023: Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks and Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl [meet](#) with Vice-Minister of Defense Suzuki Atsuo at the Pentagon.

April 27, 2023: Prime Minister Kishida [meets](#) with Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin in Tokyo.

April 27, 2023: President Biden [meets](#) with South Korean President Yoon in Washington, DC.

April 28, 2023: FM Hayashi and Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo [speak](#) by telephone.