



***KISHIDA GOES ALL-IN ON
PARTNERSHIP WITH THE U.S.***

BY BRAD GLOSSERMAN

Brad Glosserman (brad@pacforum.org) is deputy director of and visiting professor at the Center for Rule-Making Strategies at Tama University as well as senior adviser (nonresident) at Pacific Forum. He is the author of "Peak Japan: The End of Great Ambitions" (Georgetown University Press, 2019).

On March 7 Australia and Vietnam upgraded their relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership following the 50th ASEAN-Australia Special Summit. This elevates their cooperation in defense, security, trade, and education, and opens doors for new initiatives. However, challenges remain, and deeper cooperation can be explored.

It is telling that one of the most popular photos from Prime Minister Kishida Fumio's visit to Washington this week was a picture of him and Joe Biden relaxing together in "the Beast," the president's personal limousine, as they traveled from the White House to dinner. It was a sign that Kishida had reached the inner-most circle of US power, sitting shoulder to shoulder with the leader of the free world in a truly intimate setting.

Summits with the US president are invariably big deals for Japan's prime minister. The partnership with the United States—a notion that goes well beyond a mere "alliance"—is the foundation of Japanese national security and critical to its national interests most broadly defined. Historically, successfully managing relations with Washington has been a prerequisite for any Japanese political leader.

By every metric, this week's summit was a success. Kishida got the star-studded state dinner, and he gave an address to a joint session of Congress. Biden declared that his support for the defense of Japan was "ironclad." The two leaders delivered a bold, forward-leaning declaration of "global partnership" and produced an 18-page, 70-item list of deliverables to turn that vision into reality. Headlines across media trumpeted "a new era" and "a turning point."

Kishida's message of solidarity and support—"Japan is already standing shoulder to shoulder with the United States. You are not alone. We are with you"—was intended to disarm critics who charge that Japan is a free rider, letting the US incur the real costs of national defense. Notably, those comments were in his speech to Congress, at which he was speaking to both parties. Kishida has highlighted the publication of new defense documents in 2022 that spell out a more prominent security role, the doubling of defense spending to reach the threshold of 2% of GDP by 2027 and the modernization of its military capabilities as proof that Japan has a new understanding of its regional and global responsibilities.

Kishida was speaking to Japanese audiences, too, reminding them that the price of status and privilege is responsibility. As he explained, "The defense of freedom, democracy and the rule of law is the national interest of Japan." Previous prime ministers made that same claim, but they, quite frankly, were not compelled to turn those words into policy.

Today, however, flowery rhetoric is not enough. The Indo-Pacific is an increasingly fraught region and the possibility of conflict is real and growing. Japan is threatened and a failure to respond could have devastating consequences. Kishida recognizes that and is acting accordingly.

Unspoken but hanging over the entire trip was the threat of a second Trump presidency, and fear that his disdain for alliances could unravel the ties that are critical to Japan's security. That too has contributed to the urgency within Tokyo to modernize its military, upgrade alliance command and control, strengthen cooperation with other

regional allies and partners, and deepen integration of the two nations' defense industries. All are intended to underscore the deep and deepening connections between the two countries and the intertwining of their respective futures.

Equally important for Japan is a shared understanding and pursuit of economic security. This manifests not only in continued investment by Japanese companies within the United States—Japan has been the largest source of foreign investment in the US since 2019 and is the largest foreign employer in the US manufacturing sector—but in technology partnerships in almost every industrial sector. Japan aims to stay on the cutting edge of new and emerging technologies and has been reforming domestic laws to provide assurance that any resulting intellectual property will be protected.

Companies are reforming management structures and building internal firewalls to ensure that there is no chance of operations growing afoul of increasingly rigorous scrutiny by US regulators. It is hard, if not impossible, to overstate the importance of this economic dimension to the new partnership that Kishida and Biden announced this week.

Also hanging over the visit, for Japanese audiences, is the prospect of a parliamentary election this summer. Kishida's popularity has been tumbling for months; an NHK poll earlier this week put the approval rating for the Cabinet at 23%, a two-point drop from the last survey. Other polls report similarly grim numbers.

Kishida wants another term as LDP party president (and thus prime minister) and needs to lead his party to a national election victory to consolidate that claim. (His term ends in the fall.) This week's summit has burnished his diplomatic credentials and the G7 summit scheduled for mid-June in Italy could provide another boost.

The cover of the weekly Nikkei Asia news magazine features Kishida standing with a globe between his hands and the headline "Ready to go global." That is exactly the image that his campaign strategists and

US alliance managers want to see.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.