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Evaluating the LDP Leadership Election: Prospects for Japan's Relationship with South and North Korea and How South Korea should Respond

Lee, Kitae

(Director, Peace Research Division)

On September 29, former chairman of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Policy Research Council Fumio Kishida was elected the 27th President of the LDP. Given that the president of the LDP is a de facto elected Prime Minister, Japan now welcomes Kishida as its 100th Prime Minister. The recent LDP leadership election confirmed that 'factional' politics, a characteristic of Japanese politics, remains strong regardless of public opinion. Therefore, it is anticipated that in the short-term, the incoming Kishida government will be unable to deviate far from the influence of former Prime Minister Shizo Abe, who remains influential with the largest faction in the LDP. This will also apply to Japan's policies towards the Korean Peninsula, which means that substantial improvements to Japan's relationships with South and North Korea are unlikely to occur in the foreseeable future. South Korea should continue to watch the outcome of the general elections in Japan for the House of Representatives and House of Councillors, scheduled to be held in 2021 and 2022, respectively, as well as any policy shifts resulting from the decision-making processes of the Kishida government. In addition, South Korea needs to strive to build 'trust' in South Korea-Japan relations with Prime Minister Kishida whom emphasizes 'trust,' and maintain dialogue regarding bilateral security cooperation based on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

On September 3, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga announced during a meeting of party executives that he would not run for reelection as the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to be held on the 29th later that month. Though it was expected that Suga would seek reelection, his approval rate had rapidly dropped due to continued missteps in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. This led to the spread of the belief that the LDP would be unable to win the Japanese general election for the House of Representatives in November with Suga as its leader, which consequently forced him to resign.

Four candidates competed in the LDP leadership election; chairman of the LDP Policy Research Council Fumio Kishida, chair of the National Public Safety Commission Taro Kono, former Minister of Internal Affairs and Communications Sanae Takaichi, and executive acting Secretary-General of the LDP Noda Seiko. On September 29, Kishida defeated Koro to become the 27th President of the LDP. Given the parliamentary system in Japan, Kishida was elected Japan's 100th Prime Minister at an extraordinary session of the Diet on October 4.

Some have viewed this recent LDP leadership election positively as a lively policy debate unfolded on domestic and international issues such as responding to the pandemic, economic policy, the issue of revising the constitution, and security matters. But in the end, similar to the election of Prime Minister Suga last year, the result was largely determined by the intraparty politics among the factions within the LDP that remains detached from public opinion. This study explores and evaluates the process of the LDP leadership elections that elected Kishida as Prime Minister, discusses the future prospects for South Korea-Japan as well as North Korea-Japan relations, and offers suggestions on how South Korea should respond.

Evaluating the LDP Leadership Election: Factional Politics Remaining Influential

The first round of voting in the LDP leadership election held on September 29 consisted of 382 votes allocated to LDP members in the Japanese Diet and 382 votes

distributed to party members and ‘friends of the party.’ Kishida came in first by beating Kono by 1 vote, gaining 256 votes (146 among Diet members, 110 among party members) compared to 255 votes for Kono (86 among Diet members, 169 among party members). The result which confounded expectations of a Kono victory based on his high popularity among the public revealed how conservative factions within the party consolidated their votes to check the reformist tendencies of Kono. During the run-off election held between the first and second ranked candidates called due to the absence of a candidate with a majority of the votes, Kishida was elected the 27th President of the LDP with a total of 257 votes, beating Kono and the 170 votes that he earned.

The LDP leadership election was narrowed down to a competition between those that supported Kono, who criticized the policies of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe well before the elections, and the conservative group under the influence of Abe. Put differently, Kono was unable to overcome the limitations of factional politics centered around conservative forces led by Abe and former Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso, despite his own coalition of support from former Secretary General of the LDP Shigeru Ishiba, Minister of the Environment Koizumi Shinjiro, Suga, and widespread support by the public.

Meanwhile, Kishida was able to achieve a relatively easy victory in the run-off election by reaching an agreement with Takaichi, thereby overcoming an early crisis when Abe, who still has considerable influence within the party, supported the right-winged conservative Takaichi during the elections. Consequently, the LDP leadership election revealed that the new Kishida Cabinet will be unable to diverge from the political legacies of the Abe era, and that Abe’s political influence will persist amidst the strong factional internal politics within the LDP.

In fact, in contrast to the past when the major factions within the LDP uniformly supported and voted for a specific candidate, it was decided that members of the Diet associated with these factions would be allowed to vote based on their individual preferences. This was the result of demands from mostly the first and second term members of the Diet to freely choose the next standard bearer of the party who

would lead them to victory in the upcoming House of representatives general elections being accepted. As a consequence, the LDP leadership election was considered a test of whether the traditional dynamics of factional politics within the party would still determine the outcome, or whether the free elections adopted at the request of junior Diet members intent on winning the general elections would affect the result. But Kishida's victory in the first round by a 1 vote margin shows that Diet members of the LDP were not able to escape the dynamics of factional politics. In addition, it appears that the results reflected the perception that the moderate conservative Kishida could better lead the party to victory as the standard bearer than Takaichi.

Kishida as the Mainstream Conservative Successor under the Influence of Abe

Kishida self-proclaims himself as the legitimate successor of mainstream conservatism, represented by the 'Yoshida Line' in post-war Japan. The mainstream conservative group was the dominant force within the LDP up until the 2000s, and led Japan's post-war economic growth by relying on Japan's alliance with the U.S. for its security and minimizing its military spending. The Kochikai faction, which is led by Kishida, had maintained the position of strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance while emphasizing diplomacy vis-a-vis neighboring countries in Asia. But in the 2000s following former Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori's term in office, right-winged conservatives or the 'conservative discharge' group gained power with the Junichiro Koizumi and Abe governments. This faction called for the revision of Japan's peace constitution and promoted nationalism, historical revisionism, and independent diplomacy, thereby beginning to create tensions with neighboring countries such as China and South Korea.

Therefore, the election of Prime Minister Kishida can be viewed, on the surface, as the return of mainstream conservatism. However, comments by Kishida during the LDP leadership election process make it possible to suspect that he will not be able to deviate from the existing Abe policy line. In particular, how Kishida is

different from mainstream conservatism was starkly revealed on the issue of ‘revising the constitution’ during the election process. In March 2018, the LDP decided on the four issues of ① specifying laws for the basis of the Self Defense Force (SDF), ② newly enacting articles related to emergencies, ③ resolving the matter of eliminating and consolidating electoral districts for Japan’s House of Councillors, and ④ including a clause on improving the environment for education as its blueprint for revising the constitution. Kishida, who was the chairman of the LDP’s Policy Research Council at the time, mentioned during the recent election debates that ‘each of these issues are important revisions to the constitution from the perspective of the modernity,’ and was the only candidate that specified the timing of revising the constitution as ‘during the term of the next Prime Minister.’ Such an enthusiastic position on the issue of revising the constitution helped him gain the support of conservatives within the LDP and, in particular, the support of the Hosoda wing of the LDP which has the most members and to which Abe is a member.

The outcomes of the general elections for the House of Representatives and the House of Councillors, scheduled to be held in October 2021 and 2022, respectively, will be an important factor. If the Kishida government is able to win both these elections, it appears likely that Prime Minister Kishida will be able to form a stable power base and implement policies as intended. On the other hand, in the worst case scenario in which the LDP loses both elections, there is the possibility that the Kishida cabinet will be short lived, much like his predecessor Suga.

Forecasting South Korea-Japan, North Korea-Japan Relations

Relations between South Korea and Japan following the inauguration of the Kishida government will likely not differ too much from the Abe-Suga era. This is because, above all, Kishida was the one that signed the ‘Japan-South Korea Comfort Women Agreement’ in 2015 representing former Prime Minister Abe. In his book titled ‘Kishida Vision (『岸田ビジョン』)’, Kishida had expressed his disappointment in South Korea’s decision to rescind the agreement. Therefore, similar to how the Abe and

Suga governments urged South Korea to abide by the agreement and preemptively proposed solutions regarding the issue of comfort woman and Koreans forcibly mobilized and conscripted, Kishida is expected to maintain the position of the Abe and Suga governments in principle. In fact, Kishida mentioned during the election debate held on September 24 that South Korea must be pressed to fulfill its commitments regarding the Comfort Women Agreement. Significantly improving relations between South Korea and Japan appears unlikely in the near future considering how the Kishida government is expected to concentrate on domestic affairs for the time being, including responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and economic policies, and also how the general elections for the House of Representatives is upcoming in November.

Despite this, it is also possible that Prime Minister Kishida might seek to cultivate an environment for improved relations with South Korea while still maintaining Japan's position, considering how he mentioned his willingness to improve South Korea-Japan relations in 'Kishida Vision.' In particular, it is possible that the Japanese government will approach South Korea regarding the problems of China and North Korea that are important issues for its security.

Prime Minister Kishida has also expressed his intent to continue the policies of the Abe and Suga governments regarding bilateral relations with North Korea. Regarding the issue of Japanese abductees, the most important prerequisite for better North Korea-Japan relations, Kishida mentioned during the debates that he was considering various methods to resolve the issue, including directly meeting with Kim Jong-un. This is similar to the positions of Abe and Suga who were willing to meet with Kim Jong-un without any preconditions.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Kishida has expressed a rather tough stance on how to respond to the North Korean nuclear problem. During the LDP leadership candidate debate hosted by the Japan National Press Club on September 18, Kishida mentioned that he was considering a review of Japan's missile defense system regarding the issue of North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities. He also claimed that Japan's acquisition of the 'ability to attack enemy bases' that has been debated domestically

in Japan over the past few years could also be an option from the perspective of preparing secondary strike capabilities.

Born in Hiroshima where one of the two nuclear bombs were dropped, Kishida had originally shown considerable interest in a ‘non-nuclear’ and a ‘peace-state’ Japan. But after experiencing the positions of foreign minister and defense minister in the Abe cabinet, he has responded to the nuclear problem based on a realist perspective. In his book, ‘Towards a World without Nuclear Weapons (『核兵器のない世界へ』)’ published in 2020, he proposed the ‘Kishida Initiative’ based on the strategies of strengthening the extended deterrence provided by the U.S. and maintaining the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime. Kishida has demonstrated his realist views on the issue of nuclear weapons by personally stressing that he prefers the phrase ‘a world without nuclear weapons (核兵器のない世界)’ rather than the term ‘a world without nuclear (核のない世界)’ advocated by peace activists. Therefore, while Kishida possesses the views of ‘non-nuclear’ and ‘peace’ regarding the nuclear problem, in reality he is expected to pursue a strong policy towards the goal of denuclearizing North Korea based on strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance and maintaining the NPT regime.

South Korea’s Response

South Korea needs to consider the following responses given the realities in Japanese politics revealed by the LDP leadership election and the outlook for the Kishida governments policies towards the Korean Peninsula.

First, there needs to be a calm analysis of the realities of Japanese domestic politics and the perceptions of Prime Minister Kishida. Certain analyses in South Korea that consider Kishida as having anti-Korean views simply because he personally signed the Comfort Woman Agreement are superficial. Although Kishida signed the Agreement in his capacity as foreign minister, the Comfort Woman Agreement was the result of a decision-making process led by the Blue House and the Prime Minister’s Office in South Korea and Japan, respectively. Therefore, there needs

to be not only a proper understanding of Japan's decision-making process and the surrounding domestic political realities in Japan, but also a comprehensive analysis of Prime Minister Kishida's policies towards the Korean Peninsula and his views and ideology as well.

Second, measures of security cooperation between South Korean and Japan based on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula need to be sought, and efforts need to be made in order to establish 'trust' to improve bilateral relations between the two countries. South Korea and Japan not only share the same ally in the U.S. but also share a common security threat stemmed from the North Korean nuclear problem. In a situation where a cooperative system among South Korea, the U.S., and Japan is essential for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, the North Korea policies involving North Korean nuclear weapons will be impossible to implement without cooperation from South Korea and the U.S.. Therefore, South Korea and Japan, which pursue the same goal of achieving denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula based on the preservation of the NPT regime, need to continue dialogue on security cooperation. In the mid- to long-term, there is also a need to seek ways in which the policy principles of a non-nuclear and a peace-state Japan observed by Prime Minister Kishida can be connected to the South Korean government's 'policy of peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula.' To do so, efforts to improve bilateral relations between South Korea and Japan in order to build 'trust,' an aspect that Prime Minister Kishida always emphasizes in foreign policy, are required from the governments in both countries. ©KINU 2021

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