

ADAM P. LIFF

## Japan in 2021

*COVID-19 (Again), the Olympics, and a New Administration*

### ABSTRACT

For Japan in 2021, COVID-19-related disruption was again the dominant storyline. Its impact transcended societal consequences to affect Japan's economy, politics, and foreign affairs. It frustrated Japan's economic recovery and, for the second time in as many years, contributed to a prime minister's premature resignation. Yet the year also witnessed major positive developments, including the "2020" Tokyo Olympics/Paralympics; an (eventually) successful vaccine rollout; public health outcomes vastly better than those of any other G7 member; an expected return to economic growth; and a smooth national election. On October 31, new prime minister Kishida Fumio led the ruling LDP–Komeito coalition into Japan's first general election since 2017. Despite losing a few seats, it retained a comfortable lower-house majority, ensuring that a subplot for Japan in 2021 was—again—relative continuity in national politics and foreign affairs.

**KEYWORDS:** Japan, COVID-19, politics, economics, Olympics

Regardless of the hopes the Japanese people and their leaders carried into 2021 for an end to the pandemic, just as in 2020 (Liff 2021), COVID-19 was the dominant storyline, affecting most other subplots in ways large and small. Despite immense logistical, public health, and other challenges, Japan belatedly carried out a historic and secure "Tokyo 2020" Summer Olympics and Paralympics under extraordinary circumstances. It also again handled

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the pandemic far better than any other G7 country (as measured by confirmed case counts and deaths). Nevertheless, widespread public frustration with the government's response prompted the abrupt resignation of Japan's prime minister for the second time in as many years. The cabinet of prime minister Suga Yoshihide (September 2020 to October 2021) was so unpopular by the time of the late-summer "fifth wave" of COVID infections—Japan's worst to date—that he opted not even to run for another term as Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) president. Throughout the year, COVID-19 countermeasures, including curtailed business activities, a strict *de facto* ban on entry by most foreign nationals, and supply chain challenges were but a few examples of the pandemic-induced headwinds buffeting Japan's economy and society.

Despite being a rough year, however, as of this writing (early November), 2021 seemed likely to close on a more hopeful note. In September, a remarkably competitive intra-LDP election to succeed Suga as the party's leader was won by the moderate former long-serving foreign minister Kishida Fumio, who became Japan's 100th prime minister on October 4. With COVID-19 case counts plummeting after a late-summer surge, on October 1 the government fully lifted a state of emergency, marking the first time in six months the entire country was not under the measure. Later that month, the IMF (2021) forecast positive GDP growth for 2021 (2.4%) and 2022 (3.2%).

At month's end (October 31), Japan's first general election since 2017 reduced but retained the ruling LDP–Komeito's comfortable majority in Japan's powerful lower house, suggesting a solid mandate for Kishida and his effort to pursue a "new capitalism" aimed at achieving economic growth while addressing inequality and COVID-19-related disruption. Though Japan was hardly out of the woods pandemic-wise, with an electoral mandate the Kishida administration relaunched in early November under very different circumstances than Suga's had just one year earlier. Despite an exceptionally slow vaccine rollout earlier in the year, by November Japan had by far the lowest confirmed daily case counts and deaths among G7 members and tied with Canada for the most fully vaccinated member state. On November 8, Japan reported no confirmed deaths from COVID-19 for the first time in 15 months. These trends raised hopes that Japan could mitigate a widely feared winter surge and possibly accelerate a return toward something resembling a post-pandemic "normal" in 2022.

## COVID-19 (AGAIN) AND THE 2020 OLYMPICS

In spring 2020 then-prime-minister Abe Shinzo (2012–2020) and his government were widely criticized domestically for a slow and ineffective response to the novel coronavirus. In spring 2021 the Suga administration was widely criticized for a slow vaccine rollout. The launch of Japan's vaccination campaign was plagued by various problems, including a shortage of vaccine supplies owing to Japan's dependence on overseas production; too few medical personnel trained and authorized to inoculate people; strict regulations on new drug approvals, including mandatory domestic clinical trials; and various logistical challenges in administering the shots via local governments. Consequently, Japan's vaccination campaign did not kick into gear for front-line essential workers until February and for its large elderly population until April, four months after inoculations had begun in the United States and the United Kingdom. By mid-May only 3% of Japan's 126 million people had received at least one shot, the worst performance among major economies (COVID-19 Data Explorer, n.d.).

However, by late spring, once the government addressed these issues, including by establishing mass vaccination sites run by Japan's Self-Defense Forces and by allowing dentists, lab technicians, and EMTs to put shots in arms, daily vaccinations surged. By the end of May, Japan was vaccinating more people daily, on a population-adjusted basis, than the United States. Throughout the summer, more than a million Japanese received shots every day. By early August the rapidity of Japan's rollout surpassed all other G7 countries—averaging four to five times that of the United States despite the latter's far more severe public health crisis. After a brief August-September surge induced by the Delta variant, daily confirmed cases and deaths plummeted across the country. By early November nearly three-fourths of Japan's population had been fully vaccinated, and its confirmed case counts and death rate per million people were small fractions of its G7 counterparts (COVID-19 Data Explorer, n.d.). Concerns earlier in the year about possible widespread vaccine hesitancy had largely faded away.

Though Japan's response to COVID-19 was relatively successful from the standpoint of public health, the societal and economic fallout was nevertheless significant—including not only domestic emergency proclamations and strong headwinds against economic growth but also strict border controls. As late as September the estimated numbers of foreign visitors entering

Japan and of Japanese nationals going overseas remained down 99% and 97%, respectively, compared to two years earlier (*Mainichi* 2021). Japan's borders were effectively shut to most foreigners for most of 2021, including tourists, businesspeople, scholars, and even hundreds of thousands pre-certified for residence status, such as technical intern trainees and international students (*Nikkei* 2021b).

Despite these realities, the Suga government and the International Olympic Committee insisted that the postponed “2020” Tokyo Summer Olympics/Paralympics go forward. This was controversial. In June, polls suggested that most Japanese feared a rebound in COVID-19 cases, and nearly one-third thought the games should be canceled entirely (*Kyodo* 2021). Nevertheless, Suga insisted that the games would be “safe and secure.” Overcoming immense logistical and public health challenges, the Tokyo Olympics were held from July 23 to August 8, followed by the Paralympics August 25 to September 5. Though dubbed the “no fun” Olympics by some frustrated athletes because of unprecedentedly strict COVID-19 protocols, including a ban on public spectators, public sentiment improved as the games got underway. This was probably due in no small part to the impressive performances of Japan's athletes, who won more gold medals than ever before.

## NATIONAL POLITICS

Last year, this section ended as follows: “Whether Suga is ultimately remembered as a caretaker serving out the final year of Abe's term or 2020 is the beginning of a new Suga Era remains to be seen” (Liff 2021). Amid the controversy over the Olympics, COVID-related public health emergencies, and Japan's August-September fifth wave of coronavirus cases—its worst to date—the world got its answer: On September 3, Suga announced his intent to resign, abandoning his hopes of running for reelection as LDP president and leading the party/ruling coalition into a (constitutionally mandated) autumn general election. Though Suga entered office in September 2020 with 62% public support, by January 2021 his Cabinet's support rate was under water. During 2021 it peaked at 44%. By late spring it had fallen to 35%, and by August it was 29% (NHK 2021). Widespread public dissatisfaction with the government's COVID-19 response effectively ended a prime ministership prematurely—for the second year in a row.

Though 2021 saw numerous intriguing national and local political storylines, beyond Suga's resignation two autumn political events were most consequential for Japan: the LDP's September 29 presidential election and its October 31 general election. The latter was especially significant as it marked Japan's first lower-house election in four years and the first since 2009 without former prime minister Abe at the LDP/ruling coalition's helm.

The September intra-LDP contest to succeed Suga as party president had high stakes. The winner would not only become the first politician since Abe in 2018 to be elected to a full three-year term as the head of Japan's most powerful political party. By virtue of the LDP's lower-house majority, he or she would also become prime minister. The weeks-long race pitted the ultimate winner—Abe's moderate long-serving former foreign minister, Kishida—against three other former ministers in Abe's Cabinet: from his left, popular vaccine czar and former foreign and defense minister Kono Taro and former minister for internal affairs and communications Noda Seiko, and from his right, Abe acolyte cum former minister of internal affairs and communications Takaichi Sanae. The race was notable for its 50/50 gender balance (despite more than 90% of LDP Diet members being men), the willingness of several faction leaders to allow their members to vote their conscience, and the fact that in a race to lead Japan's postwar dominant and conservative party the most popular candidate among the general public (Kono) had a history of staunch opposition to nuclear power and supported same-sex marriage and dual surnames for married couples.

But Japan's general public does not choose the LDP's president. On September 29, Kishida defeated Kono in a two-man run-off, 257 votes to 170. On October 4 he formally succeeded Suga to become Japan's 100th prime minister, and immediately announced plans to dissolve the lower house. The general election campaign began on October 19, and voters went to the polls on October 31.

Japan's first general election campaign since 2017 had some unusual characteristics. First, it was extremely short. That was by design, as Kishida sought to exploit an anticipated public honeymoon and to catch the opposition off guard. Second, it featured unprecedentedly close electoral cooperation among opposition parties. Of particular note was the strange-bedfellows pairing of the leading opposition Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP) and the Japanese Communist Party (JCP). (For

example, whereas the former supports the US–Japan alliance and Japan’s Self-Defense Forces, the latter wants both abolished.) Though their shared desire to defeat the LDP was sufficient for electoral cooperation, there was less coordination on policy. The JCP also made clear it would not join a government even if the CDP somehow became able to form one. Nevertheless, opposition-party coordination was significant: 132 of 289 single-member districts saw head-to-head (LDP/Komeito vs. opposition candidate) contests. For example, the JCP fielded only 105 candidates in single-seat constituencies, significantly fewer than the 206 it had run in 2017 (*Yomiuri* 2021).

When the dust settled, the LDP had lost only 15 seats, outperforming (relatively low) pre-election expectations, and Komeito gained three. All told, the ruling coalition retained a diminished but still comfortable majority of 293 seats (63% of the lower house’s 465). Of those, the LDP won 261—enough to effectively control and make up the majority of all standing committees.

Though the election’s big-picture result—continuation of the LDP–Komeito government—was hardly shocking, there were some smaller surprises. Of particular note, despite their unprecedentedly ambitious electoral coordination both the CDP and JCP *lost* seats, with the former’s total falling from 110 to 96 and the latter’s from 12 to 10. (This dismal result led the CDP’s leader to announce his resignation and rendered the future of electoral cooperation among opposition parties uncertain.) In contrast, the conservative, Osaka-based Nippon Ishin no Kai (Japan Innovation Party) outperformed expectations, more than tripling its seats (from 11 to 41) to become the third-largest party in the lower house. Though this led some observers to suggest that Ishin might replace Komeito in the ruling coalition, the unique benefits Komeito provides the LDP in national elections (Liff and Maeda 2019), coupled with Ishin’s apparent disinterest, made such a scenario unlikely. Nevertheless, together with the Democratic Party for the People’s gaining seats (from 8 to 11), the “pro-constitutional-reform camp” had increased their strength further beyond a two-thirds majority—ensuring that the perennial but never yet successful constitutional-revision movement will remain an important space to watch. Finally, several political heavyweights, including LDP secretary-general Amari Akira and former king-maker Ozawa Ichiro, lost seats in their districts (but remained in the Diet through Japan’s proportional representation system).

Beyond the headline results, the 2021 general election also reinforced long-standing concerns among some observers about voter/youth enthusiasm and representation in Japan's national politics. First, the election saw the third-lowest voter turnout since 1945—the latest in a string of elections since 2012 to generate low public enthusiasm, especially among non-aligned voters. Second, the campaign featured the fewest candidates—1,051 for 465 seats—and second-lowest percentage of first-time candidates since Japan introduced its new electoral system in the 1990s. Third, the number of candidates under age 40 (99) was comparable to those over age 70 (97), with the former figure the lowest in history. Finally, despite the Diet's 2018 passage of a historic law calling for gender equity in politics—an acknowledgment that Japan ranks very low in global ranks of female representation in its powerful lower house (10%)—the proportion of female candidates (18%) was unchanged from 2017 (Nikkei 2021a). After the election, the percentage of seats held by women was unchanged, and the number actually declined by two.

The abrupt resignations of two Japanese prime ministers in as many years and the lukewarm public support for Kishida immediately after taking office rekindled concerns among some observers of a possible return to Japan's annual "revolving door" of short-lived prime ministers and the political instability that characterized the years immediately preceding the relatively popular and stable Abe government's nearly eight years in power (2012–2020).<sup>1</sup> Though this is possible, it seems unlikely, for several reasons. First, Kishida appears to have a much stronger mandate than Suga. Unlike his predecessor, Kishida was elected by his colleagues to a full three-year term as LDP president in a competitive intra-party election. He then led the ruling coalition to a lower-house election victory, where the LDP's performance exceeded most expectations. Furthermore, the general election itself suggested that the major factors facilitating the ruling coalition's repeated electoral success since returning to power in a 2012 landslide victory have not fundamentally changed. These factors include the fractiousness and relative unpopularity of the opposition parties, historically low voter participation, and close LDP–Komeito coordination. Lastly, the election results

1. The 2006–2012 period witnessed six different Japanese prime ministers elected in only six years. Also, control of the government changed twice as a result of landslide elections in opposite directions (the Democratic Party of Japan wrested control from the long-ruling LDP–Komeito coalition in 2009; the LDP–Komeito coalition got it back in 2012 and has not lost it since).

themselves suggest a basic preference within both the LDP and the general population for stability, continuity, and moderation.

Nevertheless, continued economic, fiscal, and demographic challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic, and an increasingly complicated international environment, *inter alia*, are generating pressure for ambitious reforms. Due to temperament, ideological moderation, COVID-19's uncertain trajectory, and/or political calculations, in the short term Kishida may tread carefully—avoiding potentially controversial reforms that could split the party. However, some in the party may pressure him to pursue more ambitious reforms, especially if the LDP performs well in the summer 2022 upper-house election. The next constitutionally mandated election would not be until 2025.

## ECONOMY

As noted last year, though there were a few silver linings, such as a relatively low unemployment rate and a surging stock market, COVID-19 made 2020 an awful year for Japan's economy. By the second half of 2021, however, circumstances had improved significantly. In mid-October the IMF (2021) forecast Japan's GDP growth for 2021 at 2.4%. Though better than Japan's recent historical average, this was lower than IMF growth forecasts for other major economies (e.g., the US at 6%; China at 8%; the euro area at 5%) and would be insufficient to make up for the 4.6% contraction in 2020. In short, Japan's economy still faced significant headwinds. The news was better for stockholders: after reaching historic heights in 2020, Japan's benchmark Nikkei 225 index set new records in 2021.

The positive economic headlines also masked public concerns about inequality. Coupled with sluggish growth and increasing public debt, the future trajectory of Japan's economy as it struggles to come out of the pandemic is uncertain. Kishida highlighted these issues in his October inaugural policy speech. He called for further economic stimulus measures and financial support for people who need it as part of a socioeconomic vision he calls "new capitalism" (*atarashii shihonshugi*), which he said would treat growth and wealth redistribution as part of a "virtuous cycle" (Kishida 2021). Though the details remain to be worked out, Kishida's rhetoric could augur a shift away from what some observers consider a "neoliberal orthodoxy" that has defined mainstream LDP policy in the twenty-first century.

## FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND NATIONAL SECURITY

Though 2021 was again an eventful year in Japanese foreign affairs and national security, amid the disruption caused by COVID-19 as of this writing it is difficult to identify major departures from the longer-term trends discussed in last year's review. That said, several noteworthy stories can be extracted from the year's headlines.

Given the centrality of the United States to Japan's foreign policy, the transition from US president Donald Trump (2017–2021) to Joseph Biden (2021–) was perhaps the most significant external development for Japan. Immediately after taking office, the Biden administration unabashedly championed allies as “force multipliers,” with a particular emphasis on democratic partners. As a testament to the particular importance the new administration places on Japan, the first overseas trips of Biden's secretaries of state and defense were to Tokyo (March), and Biden's first in-person summit was with Suga (April). The historic Biden–Suga joint statement charted an ambitious and comprehensive agenda for the allies on issues ranging from climate to trade and pandemics. Perhaps most famously, amid deepening tensions between China and Taiwan, Suga joined Biden in “underscor[ing] the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait” and “peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues”—the first such reference in a US–Japan summit statement since 1969 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2021a).

Though the US–Japan relationship remained on solid ground during 2021, some current and future challenges were clear. Of particular significance for Japan in the economics/trade space is Washington's apparent continued disinterest in proactively supporting the ambitious free trade and regional economic integration agenda successive Japanese leaders have championed. Ten months into the Biden administration, not much has changed. With China's application to join the Japan-led, 11-member Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) in September, and the 15-member Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)—of which both Japan and China are members—set to enter into force in early 2022, Washington is conspicuously absent from efforts to shape Asia's future economic order (Solís 2021). Challenges also abound in the security domain, especially as China's increasingly heavy investments in its military continue to bear significant fruit and major

advances in North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities cause shared concern. Amid a rapidly changing balance of power, throughout 2021 Tokyo raised US expectations that Tokyo will do much more to bolster deterrence. The Suga administration's comments about China and the Taiwan Strait, the Biden–Suga statement's commitment “to bolster [Japan's] national defense capabilities to further strengthen the Alliance and regional security,” Kishida and other candidates' forward-leaning statements on security reforms in the LDP presidential campaign, and the LDP general election campaign manifesto's call for effectively doubling Japan's defense budget all received significant attention in Washington.

Consistent with its now eight-year-old national security strategy, beyond strengthening the US–Japan alliance throughout 2021 Japan also continued to bolster its own defense capabilities and pursue closer ties with various “like-minded” nations, especially democratic US allies and partners. Headline-grabbing developments during the year included the further elevation of the Quad group of maritime democracies (the US, Japan, Australia, and India), including military exercises and the first-ever virtual and in-person quadrilateral summits; Japan's high-level foreign and defense ministerial meetings with other US treaty allies, including Australia, France, Germany, and the UK; and a US F-35B stealth fighter's successful test-landing on a Japanese destroyer, the latest concrete indication of Japan's plans to convert the helicopter-carrying destroyer into a ship capable of embarking fixed-wing aircraft. Continuing another longer-term trend, Japan–Australia security ties deepened, including Japan agreeing under its 2015 security legislation to extend Japan's Self-Defense Forces' protection to Australian vessels in peacetime on request. Lastly, it is worth noting that a few major national security topics featured in last year's review did not emerge as prominent storylines in 2021. Though after three years of debate the Diet finally passed a revision to the national referendum law, the perennial debate on constitutional revision largely stalled under Suga. So did movement toward acquiring “strike capabilities”—something Abe had announced in 2020 that Japan would formally consider. Together with calls for increased defense spending, both are likely to prompt significant debate under Japan's new leadership.

Concerning Japan's often tense relations with its immediate neighbors in Northeast Asia, no obvious breakthroughs occurred in 2021. Though Japan sought a “stable” relationship with Beijing, major frictions over

a long-festering territorial dispute and other issues continued, and the April Biden–Suga statement conspicuously highlighted shared “concerns over Chinese activities that are inconsistent with the international rules-based order, including the use of economic and other forms of coercion” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2021a). New frictions emerged, as well. Of particular note, 2021 witnessed unprecedentedly mainstream discussion in Japan about cross-Strait frictions and a possible “Taiwan contingency” (*Taiwan yuji*). The Suga administration joined the US and other major democratic partners in expressing shared concerns about peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and called repeatedly for a peaceful resolution. Japan’s 2021 defense white paper even explicitly linked the “stability of Taiwan’s situation” to both national security and international stability and called on Japan to pay much closer attention (Boeisho 2021, 52). With South Korea, 2021 saw no major breakthroughs on a long-standing impasse over contemporary treatment of historical issues, though the year wound down with hopes that Seoul’s 2022 presidential election could allow a “reset.” Meanwhile, Pyongyang continued to test controversial missile and other capabilities, including a suspected submarine-launched ballistic missile. Finally, with Russia there were no major breakthroughs on a long-sought peace treaty.

In terms of foreign economic policy, in January then foreign minister Motegi Toshimitsu reiterated calls for Japan to continue to champion a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” and maintain its status as a standard-bearer for expanding free and fair trade, including through the CPTPP, RCEP, and bilateral agreements with the US, UK, and European Union (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2021b). On climate policy, a high-profile priority of the Suga government, Japan achieved mixed results. In September, the Climate Action Tracker (2021) judged Japan’s climate targets, policies, and finance “insufficient,” but acknowledged positive momentum, including the April announcement of a new 2030 domestic emissions reduction target, which it called a “significant step forward.” Lastly, a novel feature of Japanese diplomacy in 2021 was Japan’s provision of tens of millions of COVID-19 vaccine doses, mostly to Asian neighbors such as Vietnam, Indonesia, and Taiwan.

As for what the advent of the new Kishida administration means for Japan’s foreign policy, barring a major external shock, no major departures from the trajectory consolidated during Abe’s long tenure (discussed in last year’s review) seem likely. After all, Kishida was Abe’s foreign minister from

2012 to 2017—a period during which key aspects of Japan’s years-long foreign policy orientation were set. These include Japan’s 2013 national security strategy, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision, championing of free trade through the Trans-Pacific Partnership, Japan’s historic 2015 peace and security legislation, and a clear emphasis on bolstering the US–Japan alliance and expanding security, economic, and other ties with other “like-minded” countries. Reflecting deepening concerns in Japan about the growing salience of geoeconomics (especially *vis-à-vis* China), as well as threats to national security through economics, information technology, and other means, Kishida has already inherited his predecessor’s emphasis on “economic security” (*keizai anzen hoshō*). On taking office he created a new Cabinet post responsible for it, and his inaugural policy speech emphasized “economic security” as one of three pillars of his government’s growth strategy (Kishida 2021).

As it concerns more traditional security affairs, though Kishida himself has historically seemed lukewarm toward conservative LDP defense priorities such as constitutional revision, significantly ramping up defense spending, or acquiring strike capabilities, the LDP presidential campaign and domestic and international political vicissitudes suggest that the best question may be how much he will personally advocate for these changes, rather than whether calls for them from within and outside the LDP will continue. (The latter seems all but inevitable.) A clear indicator of how Japan plans to proceed on these and other issues will be the Kishida government’s first budget and expected 2022 revision of Japan’s 2013 national security strategy and 2018 national defense program guidelines and its midterm defense program. Beyond national security, other questions of significance for the next year-plus include whether the 50th anniversary of Japan–PRC diplomatic normalization (1972) or a new administration in Seoul will facilitate breakthroughs in Tokyo’s often-tense relations with China and South Korea; how forward-leaning the Kishida government will be on Taiwan-related matters; whether it can convince the Biden administration to embrace a more proactive agenda on regional economic integration; and how, and how much, it will prioritize climate change policy.

Though much remains uncertain, one thing is not in doubt: 2022 is sure to be a consequential year for Japanese diplomacy.

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