

Japan's Ishiba Comes to Washington: Summit Success

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The U.S.–Japan summit was a success for bilateral relations and for boosting Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba's political strength.

The United States should continue close coordination with both Seoul and Tokyo as it formulates a new strategy for North Korea and China.

As America grapples with China and North Korea, it should seek to maintain and strengthen regional alliances, especially with Japan and South Korea.

Despite great trepidation in Tokyo that Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba was not up to the task, the U.S.–Japan summit was a success for bilateral relations and boosting Ishiba's political strength. President Donald Trump affirmed long-standing U.S. commitment to Japan's security and the denuclearization of North Korea, while Ishiba highlighted Japanese economic contributions to the United States. What was not said during the meeting was just as important, with both leaders avoiding contentious security issues. Despite the constructive meeting, America's northeast Asia allies remain wary of any potential shifts in U.S. Indo–Pacific policies.

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A Common Understanding

The Trump–Ishiba joint leaders’ statement¹ was an enumeration of traditional U.S. security pledges reflecting great policy continuity. Earlier comments by some Trump Administration officials had raised concerns of reduced American commitment to its Indo–Pacific treaty allies and abandonment of North Korean denuclearization in favor of limited arms control objectives.

However, President Trump underscored America’s unwavering commitment to the defense of Japan, using the full range of capabilities—including nuclear weapons—while emphasizing that the U.S.–Japan alliance remains the cornerstone of peace, security, and prosperity in the Indo–Pacific. The two leaders also pledged to enhance U.S.–Japanese deterrence and response capabilities, including increasing U.S. military presence in Japan’s south-west islands.

Trump and Ishiba vowed to continue efforts to create Indo–Pacific coalitions against regional security threats. The two leaders affirmed their “resolute commitment” to the complete denuclearization of North Korea as well as the continued importance of the recently invigorated Japan–South Korea–United States trilateral partnership against the North Korean threat.

Japanese and South Korean officials had expressed concerns of “Korea passing,” in which Washington engages with Pyongyang while sidelining its allies. However, a senior U.S. Administration official speaking prior to the summit indicated that Washington would remain in “lockstep” with Seoul and Tokyo on diplomatic outreach to North Korea.²

In a subtle but telling change on increased support to Taiwan, the joint statement for the first time opposed “any attempt to unilaterally change the status quo [in the Taiwan Straits] by force or coercion.” Last year’s Biden–Kishida joint statement included a similar global pledge but did not specifically link it to Taiwan.³

On the economic front, Prime Minister Ishiba sought to mitigate President Trump’s long-standing criticism of the U.S. trade deficit with Japan by highlighting Tokyo’s economic contributions to the American economy as the largest foreign direct investor for five consecutive years—creating American jobs—coupled with pledges for additional investment and purchases.

Ishiba pledged to boost Japan’s investment in the United States to \$1 trillion from the current \$800 billion.⁴ Trump responded that Japan would begin importing “historic new shipments” of U.S. liquified natural gas with a joint venture to build a pipeline crossing Alaska.⁵

The two leaders also reached an apparent compromise on the U.S. rejection of Nippon Steel's proposed takeover of the U.S. Steel company. Trump said during a post-summit press conference that Nippon Steel would invest in rather than purchase U.S. Steel. Details were not announced, but Ishiba commented that Nippon Steel would provide technology to U.S. Steel, which would remain American-owned.

Despite Ishiba's positive comments, Trump underscored that he would not tolerate the trade deficit with Japan—\$56 billion in 2024⁶—to remain as is. Newly announced tariffs, though not directed specifically at Tokyo, will impact Japanese firms through either their exports to the United States or their Japanese automakers' operations in Canada and Mexico.

Avoiding Security Disagreements

The United States welcomed Japan's commitment to increasing its defense spending to 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP)—a doubling of its decades-long unofficial cap. After his return to Tokyo, Ishiba commented that Trump did not press him to further boost Japan's defense spending.⁷ Some Trump officials have recommended Japan increase defense spending to 3 percent of GDP.⁸ Nor did Trump preview seeking significant increases in next year's bilateral host nation support negotiations or warn of U.S. troop withdrawals as during his first term.

For his part, Ishiba did not raise any of his controversial security proposals that have caused both puzzlement and concern. While a stalwart supporter of the alliance with the United States, Ishiba has criticized it as an "asymmetrical bilateral treaty"⁹ and had advocated for revising the status of forces agreement that governs the manner in which U.S. forces operate in Japan and their jurisdiction under Japanese law. He has also called for an Asian NATO, though without removing existing constraints on the use of Japanese forces and nuclear sharing with the United States, which runs counter to long-standing Japanese aversion to nuclear weapons.

Ishiba Buoyed by Success

Ishiba returned to Japan to widespread praise and a bump in his dismal approval ratings. Yet, despite the upbeat meeting with Trump, the prime minister still faces significant challenges to delivering on his promises, particularly doubling the country's defense budget. Ishiba's decision to call a snap election in October had disastrous results, losing the ruling party's majority in the national legislature for the first time in 15 years. Potential

coalition partners eschewed aligning with Ishiba's party, leaving him the leader of a minority government beholden to opposition parties for implementing any legislation.

South Korea, embroiled in political turmoil after both its president and then acting replacement president were impeached, is struggling to establish a similar relationship with the Trump Administration. The current government's efforts are further hindered by the likelihood that President Yoon Suk Yeol's impeachment will be upheld by the Constitutional Court, which would trigger a special presidential election that the progressive opposition is expected to win. Such a South Korean government would almost certainly be more conciliatory toward China and North Korea, antagonistic toward Japan, and less committed to the U.S. alliance.

What Washington Should Do

The Trump Administration should build upon the successful summit with Japan and seek to replicate it in meetings with South Korean officials by taking the following actions:

- **Affirming America's commitment to defend its allies.** As President Trump did with Prime Minister Ishiba, the U.S. government should continually reinforce that it will defend its Japanese and South Korean allies by using all necessary force, potentially up to and including nuclear weapons. Washington should pledge to maintain current levels of U.S. forces in Japan and South Korea as well as sufficient forces in the western Pacific to deter and, if necessary, defeat the Chinese and North Korean threats.
- **Emphasizing the importance of trilateral security cooperation.** Recent advances in security cooperation among Japan, South Korea, and the United States—including real-time exchange of North Korean missile launch warnings—should continue and expand. Washington should encourage both Seoul and Tokyo to improve bilateral relations and expand military coordination. Highlighting the necessity of coordinated allied responses to common Chinese and North Korean security threats, as well as the economic benefits of improved bilateral trade relations, may help to overcome domestic opposition.
- **Urging Japan to fully fund its defense budget.** In December 2022, Japan announced a comprehensive strategy for enhancing its

military capabilities and expanding its regional security role. Prime Minister Ishiba should implement necessary measures to ensure funding for the pledged doubling of the nation's defense budget to 2 percent of its GDP.

- **Enhancing U.S.–Japan policy coordination and implementation for Taiwan contingencies.** Tokyo is augmenting forces and facilities in its southwest island chain near Taiwan and planning to procure longer-range missiles to extend protective coverage. Japan should closely coordinate its plans with the United States to identify complementary roles and missions not only for the defense of Japan but also for a broader regional strategy.

Conclusion

As America grapples with an increasingly powerful China and a belligerent North Korea, it should seek to not only maintain but also strengthen its regional alliances, especially with Japan and South Korea. The Trump–Ishiba summit was a positive step toward reassuring America's regional allies about the U.S. commitment to the Indo–Pacific while encouraging them to improve their own defense capabilities and assume a larger security role in the Indo–Pacific. The United States should continue close coordination with both Seoul and Tokyo as it formulates a new strategy for China and North Korea.

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Endnotes

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