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NATIONAL ANALYSIS

U.S.-Japan alliance to take hit from Suga's decision to step down

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's abrupt decision to effectively abdicate his post at the end of this month has unnerved alliance managers in Washington, who are holding out hope that Tokyo can avoid a revolving door of leaders and remain a stable, close partner in confronting global challenges, including those posed by China.

Still less than a year in office, the administration of U.S. President Joe Biden has already invested a significant amount of energy into building strong ties with the Suga administration and shoring up the alliance with Japan as Washington's focus on the region intensifies.

Highlighting his administration's goal of bolstering ties with Japan, Biden held his first in-person summit with Suga at the White House in April, after the U.S. defense chief and secretary of state both made Tokyo their first destination for so-called two-plus-two talks (https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100161035.pdf). The two sides also used their early meetings to set the stage for making concrete progress on a variety of economic and security issues before the year's end, including establishing the U.S.-Japan Competitiveness and Resilience (https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100177722.pdf) framework.

In their April meeting, Suga and Biden released a joint statement (https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/16/u-s-japan-joint-leaders-statement-u-s-japan-global-partnership-for-a-new-era/) that declared the beginning of "a new era" for the "global partnership" between the allies. That communique made headlines for explicitly singling out concerns over Taiwan for the first time since 1969, drawing the ire of China. But it also heralded the alliance as "the cornerstone of peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region" and included a passage in which Japan "resolved to bolster its own national defense capabilities" — a long-sought goal of Washington's that has become especially relevant in the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Much has been expected of another planned two-plus-two meeting between the allies due sometime before the year's end and an in-person summit of leaders from the "Quad" security-focused grouping of Australia, India, Japan and the U.S. that had been eyed for later this month.

But with Suga out, a new leader set to take the reins of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party at the end of this month and a general election due sometime this autumn, that timeline — and any progress in talks about Japan boosting its defense capabilities — will take a hit, as new relationships will need to be forged.

"It's a setback that we'll have to work hard to overcome," James Schoff, a former senior Pentagon East Asia specialist, said, noting that the alliance has already been "slow out of the gate on a variety of important issues," due in part to a drawn-out U.S. confirmation process, pandemic priorities in both countries and the U.S. focus on Afghanistan.

(https://cdn-japantimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/np_file_110697.jpeg)

Schoff, currently with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said the allies "will lose about two months during this election cycle, and now the next two-plus-two meeting could be another first-time meet for the parties, rather than a follow-up with a stronger sense of continuity."

The issues of continuity and stability have emerged as the primary concerns for Washington, former U.S. officials and observers say, now that Suga is poised to join a long list of Japanese leaders to depart after only about a year in office.

The tenure of Suga's predecessor, Shinzo Abe, spanned nearly eight years — a record — thanks to a change in party rules that allowed him to extend his term as LDP president and, in turn, prime minister. But in the two decades prior to Abe's second stint as leader, Japan had been derided for its "revolving door" of prime ministers, most of whom also lasted only about a year in their posts.

"The sudden tumult in Japanese politics ... raises questions about a potential return to political instability, a string of short-term leadership that followed previous prime ministers who enjoyed long tenures," wrote (https://www.csis.org/analysis/japans-prime-minister-steps-aside) Michael Green, a

former senior director for Asia at the National Security Council under U.S. President George W. Bush, and Nicholas Szechenyi, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank in Washington.

While Japan's strategic trajectory "appears firmly in place," the pair wrote, "the question in the wake of Suga's sudden departure is whether Japan can produce a new leader with enough staying power to implement alliance initiatives."

As of Monday, just one candidate, former Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida, had formally announced their intention to replace Suga. Several others, including vaccine czar Taro Kono, former defense chief Shigeru Ishiba and ex-internal affairs minister Sanae Takaichi, have signaled an interest in running.

"All of these candidates may have some variation in their approach to the alliance, but it is more a question of the degree and speed with which they will push cooperation rather than posing any doubts over the direction of the alliance," said Christopher Hughes, a professor of Japanese studies at the University of Warwick in England.

(https://cdn-japantimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/np_file_110698.jpeg)

The White House, for its part, has attempted to tamp down speculation that Japan's leadership shake-up could significantly derail alliance goals, while also praising Suga for his "leadership and partnership" on "shared challenges" in the Indo-Pacific and across the globe.

"We wish Prime Minister Suga well for the future," a White House spokesperson told The Japan Times. "The U.S.-Japan alliance is and will remain ironclad, not just between our governments, but our people."

Indeed, while headlines have focused on the hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan and its potential negative impact on American alliances in Asia, the pullout could have something of an opposite effect for the U.S. and Japan.

With Tokyo increasingly concerned about China's assertiveness near Taiwan and the Japanese-controlled Senkaku Islands, not to mention the looming threat of North Korean adventurism, Japan's leaders will be looking to go all in to keep Washington mollified.

"They will surely surmise from Biden's justification for the withdrawal from Afghanistan that, if any ally wishes to maintain U.S. security guarantees, the best way is to demonstrate they are more forthcoming in shouldering their own defensive responsibilities alongside the U.S. to boost bilateral confidence," said Hughes.

This, he added, would ensure "a high degree of continuity on alliance affairs from Suga to his successor, just as Suga did from Abe."

But rather than individuals, the key issue that could affect bilateral ties may be the looming general election. Although the LDP is unlikely to be dislodged from power, its majority in the Lower House could take a hit amid rising anger over the government's pandemic response.

"If the LDP's majority is undermined in the election, then it might mean Suga's successor — even if seeking to continue to strengthen the alliance — has to devote even more political energy to trying to stabilize their domestic political support base," Hughes said. "That could then, in turn, slow down Japanese diplomacy with the U.S., even if not fundamentally changing its direction."

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