

NATIONAL / POLITICS | ANALYSIS

Kishida's picks for top diplomat and rights adviser hint at striking balance on China



New Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi arrives at the Prime Minister's Office in Tokyo on Wednesday. | REUTERS

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With two prominent personnel changes to his administration, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida may be signaling he's planning to take a more balanced and nuanced approach to Japan's dealings with China.

Kishida on Wednesday formally appointed former education minister Yoshimasa Hayashi as the country's **new foreign minister** (<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/11/06/national/politics-diplomacy/kishida-taps-former-education-minister-yoshimasa-hayashi-japans-top-diplomat/>), and made onetime defense chief Gen Nakatani his **special adviser on human rights** (<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/11/08/national/gen-nakatani-human-rights-china/>), with a particular focus on China's contentious rights record.

Hayashi hails from Kishida's faction within the Liberal Democratic Party, which has traditionally taken a China-friendly stance, and has advocated for face-to-face dialogue with the Chinese Communist Party leadership, calling it "very important" in helping to resolve bilateral issues.

Nakatani, meanwhile, has led the charge in Japan on human rights issues in China for years. He co-founded a cross-party group of lawmakers on human rights diplomacy to draw up a Japanese version of the United States' Magnitsky Act, which authorizes governments to impose sanctions against countries accused of violating human rights, such as banning the entry of high-ranking officials from those countries.

After just over a month in office, some experts say Kishida may be looking to moderate an increasingly hawkish approach to Japan's relationship with Beijing and tackle the so-called China challenge from a more nuanced point of view.

"I do see the Hayashi appointment as part of Prime Minister Kishida's balancing act," said Richard Samuels, a Japan specialist and professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

China is Japan's top trading partner and economic links between the two Asian powerhouses run deep. But ahead of the LDP presidential election (<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/09/20/national/politics-diplomacy/ldp-presidential-candidates-china-stances/>), and in the first weeks of his term, Kishida and the party have struck hawkish positions on defense spending and acquiring a capability to strike enemy bases. Kishida has pointedly noted that both issues — which have triggered unease in Beijing — are worth studying.

Much to Beijing's chagrin, Kishida has even spoken out on some of China's so-called core issues, including Taiwan — calling it "the next big problem" (<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/09/03/national/politics-diplomacy/fumio-kishida-taiwan/>), and highlighting the enormous impact any contingency in the strait would have on Japan.

Those remarks garnered headlines, Samuels said, "but it was mistakenly identified as a shift in national policy."

Rather, the Kishida government may be attempting to thread a "very small needle," he said, pointing to the prime minister's repeated declarations that his administration will make efforts to stabilize relations with Beijing.



(https://cdn-japantimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/np_file_123223.jpeg)

Gen Nakatani, former defense chief and Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's adviser for human rights issues, attends a session at the Lower House of parliament in Tokyo on Wednesday. | REUTERS

Kishida has already reached out to President Xi Jinping, holding the first top-level phone talks (<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/10/09/national/kishida-jinping-first-talks/>), with the Chinese leader in more than a year last month. During those talks, [Kishida told Xi](https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_m1/cn/page3e_001151.html) (https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_m1/cn/page3e_001151.html) that 2022 — the 50th anniversary of the normalization of bilateral ties — will be a crucial year in setting the tone for the relationship. The two countries, Kishida said, “must take the opportunity ... to establish a constructive and stable relationship.”

In this sense, the pick of Hayashi — who also chairs the Japan-China Friendship Parliamentarians' Union, a nonpartisan group of lawmakers promoting Sino-Japanese relations — could see the new top diplomat playing a key role in stabilizing ties.

After Xi's scheduled state visit to Japan in 2020 was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Hayashi continued to advocate for face-to-face dialogue.

"When there are important issues to discuss, meeting in person is very important," Hayashi said in an interview with the [Nikkei daily](https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGKKZO65581720Y0A021C2PP8000/) (<https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGKKZO65581720Y0A021C2PP8000/>) in October last year. "The importance of such a meeting is only increasing."

Asked in a separate interview last month with [Bungei Shunju magazine](https://bungeishunju.com/n/nbd8c5cf5cf28#51Z4T) (<https://bungeishunju.com/n/nbd8c5cf5cf28#51Z4T>) about the growing support in Japan for joining the U.S. in taking a hard-line position and decoupling economically and politically from China — Hayashi said figuring out how to balance Japan's economic and security interests would be an “extremely difficult” challenge going forward.

“A simple hard-line stance will not work,” he said. “The economies of Japan and China are inextricably intertwined, and it would be impossible to reduce Japan-China trade to zero from tomorrow. As decoupling is difficult, the line between general trade and economic security is becoming important.”

Ahead of his appointment, Hayashi's stance had given rise to criticism within the LDP that he was overtly "pro-China" and therefore unsuited to be Japan's top diplomat.

This week, he attempted to dispel those objections and convey more nuance to his positions, stressing the importance of being knowledgeable about China, but "not pandering" to Beijing.

"When negotiating, it's better to know the other side well than not to know them," he said on a TV program Monday night, while noting that China's human rights issues remain "seriously concerning."

Sheila Smith, a Japan expert at the Council on Foreign Relations, said Hayashi would be taking up his new post with a "a deep understanding of the complex nuances of today's increasingly volatile relationships."

"As Japan's chief diplomat, his responsibility is to Japan's interests — not China's or even that of the U.S.," said Smith, who has served on a number of panels with Hayashi. "I have no doubt he will be able to assert those interests clearly and effectively."



(https://cdn-japantimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/np_file_123091.jpeg)

Fumio Kishida, then foreign minister, shakes hands with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang during a meeting at Zhongnanhai in Beijing in April 2016. | REUTERS

Kishida's appointment of Nakatani to the rights adviser post could also help keep the prime minister in the good graces of the LDP's China hawks — a group that includes former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who is set to take over as leader of the party's largest faction.

The sway of these lawmakers has only grown amid Beijing's crackdown on Hong Kong over the pro-democracy movement there and its treatment of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, where the U.N. estimates hundreds of thousands of members of the ethnic minority have been held in what China claims are "re-education camps."

Speaking to reporters Monday, Nakatani said he will be working with the foreign and trade ministers with instructions from the prime minister. He said some of his tasks will be making proposals to Kishida on rights issues, working with “like-minded” countries to raise awareness about human rights on the global stage and facilitating awareness on the issue among the private sector.

Nakatani, who is currently a co-chair of the [Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China](https://ipac.global/) — an international group of legislators from democratic countries focused on the challenge of China's rise — will have a solid foundation to build on in his new position.

“As a member of parliament I have been involved in human rights issues for quite some time now, so I will make use of my knowledge and experience to provide appropriate advice,” he said Monday.

Experts say it remains unclear if Nakatani will get Kishida’s green light to push for a [Japanese version of the Magnitsky Act](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/04/06/national/japan-human-rights-diplomacy/) as the prime minister looks to avoid a potentially contentious public debate over the issue [ahead of a July's Upper House election](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/10/31/national/politics-diplomacy/japan-election-foreign-policy-security/). The Foreign Ministry fears that such a law could destabilize relations with some countries while some in the business community have voiced concern about the impact on companies' bottom lines.

Regardless of which direction Kishida and Nakatani choose to move in, they will have to secure cooperation across party lines while also dealing with the private sector, which will have much to say about any developments that jeopardize business ties with China.

“There may be efforts to move towards Japanese Magnitsky sanctions, but don't expect any dramatic and quick moves on this,” said Jonathan Berkshire Miller, an expert of international security and a senior fellow at the Japan Institute of International Affairs. “Kishida will likely be judicious on how much he emphasizes human rights issues in China policy.”

Ultimately, Kishida’s selection of Nakatani and Hayashi could highlight a more nuanced approach to Sino-Japanese relations than anticipated, with the prime minister silencing critics that he is weak on China with Nakatani’s appointment while simultaneously laying the groundwork for dialogue through Hayashi’s contacts in Beijing.

The appointments “certainly indicate that Japan under Kishida will engage in cooperation with China without strings attached but will push back where Tokyo considers its interests are at stake,” said Sebastian Maslow, an expert on Japanese politics at Sendai Shirayuri Women's University.

Maslow said Kishida would build on the policy shifts already implemented under Abe during his second term that sought to bolster Japan’s role in the Indo-Pacific with China’s growing clout in mind.

“Bottom-line: Kishida appears to be continuing this course in substance though not in tone,” he said.

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