

# [***Japan's Leader Fumio Kishida on Countering Threat of China and North Korea***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BX6-1VN1-DY68-11S5-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Byline:** Tom O'Connor

**Highlight:** In an exclusive interview with Newsweek, the Prime Minister of Japan talks about the growing geopolitical tensions in East Asia.

**Body**

More than a dozen times, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida uses the word "peace" as he discusses his country's momentous decision to undertake its largest buildup of military capabilities since World War II.

"Since I became prime minister, we have substantially revised Japan's National Security Strategy," Kishida told *Newsweek* during an interview at his office in Tokyo on the heels of his first visit to Washington, D.C., as Japan's leader for talks with President [*Joe Biden*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/joe-biden?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships). "Now, in that strategy, of course, we will not change the steps we have been taking to date as a peace-loving nation."

Japan faces a changing international order that is anything but peaceful, in either its own neighborhood or beyond. Under Kishida's leadership since 2021, it has more assertively set out a policy of reinforcing its defense forces and of strengthening its alliances with the United States and other Western powers as it builds new partnerships with Asian countries that had sometimes been historically wary of its motives.

China is rapidly developing state-of-the-art military technology and seeking to assert its increasingly dominant regional position amid intensified global competition with the U.S. Its sporadic maritime confrontations with Japan over disputed East China Sea Islands are a sign of the bigger contest. North Korea, undeterred by international sanctions, seemingly achieves nuclear-capable missile milestones by the day while broadcasting fiery rhetoric toward its foes.

Meanwhile, Japan faces the repercussions of Russia's war on Ukraine as it raises the prospect of a wider war with [*NATO*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/nato?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) in Europe and as Moscow also looks to the East, where it has a long-standing territorial dispute with Tokyo.

The sheer imbalance of military power surrounding Japan is displayed in one Japanese government document shared with *Newsweek*. Japan's troops and aircraft are vastly outnumbered on all three fronts. Beijing and Moscow each command a naval fleet that outsizes that of Tokyo more than four times over.

"Military powers with high quality and quantity are concentrated in Japan's surroundings, where clear trends such as further military buildup and an increase in military activities are observed," the document states.

**A Historic Turning Point**

For Kishida, the answer is a call to arms, the likes of which have not been seen in Japan since World War II ended nearly eight decades ago with the Japanese Empire's defeat at the hands of the U.S. Kishida's own family hails from Hiroshima, and he grew up hearing the horror stories of survivors of the world's first atomic bombing, which helped end the war and established generations of U.S. preeminence.

Now, Kishida counts Washington as his most important ally amid what he calls "a historic turning point" for both Japan and the world at large. Japanese attitudes are unrecognizable from the expansionism that saw it conquer much of Asia and the Pacific and stun the U.S. with the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941, but the imperialist legacy remains a sensitive topic at home and abroad.

Kishida's offering at the controversial Yasukuni Shrine to Japan's 19th and 20th century war dead—among them World War II war criminals—on April 21 was protested not only by China, but also by fellow U.S. ally South Korea. For both countries it is a symbol of Japan's past and its record of occupation and atrocities. That legacy explained Japan's postwar aversion to rebuilding military strength. Kishida spoke frankly about why it is now engaged in a program that will mean a doubling of military spending over the next five years.

"I think we are facing the most challenging and complex security environment since the end of World War II," said Kishida, whose conservative Liberal [*Democratic Party*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/democratic-party?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) has dominated postwar ***politics***. "In such a situation, we have to protect our people's lives and livelihoods."

**Power, Hard and Soft**

Kishida repeatedly asserts that Japan has demonstrated its aversion to aggression since the war but says it must continue to make efforts to explain its military resurgence. "We have to avoid any misunderstanding here," he said.

The region is distinctly wary of the trend, said Jingdong Yuan, senior researcher and director of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's China and Asia Security Program.

"It is important for Japan to demonstrate its commitment to using force only for defensive purposes, place its growing military capabilities within the broader alliance and minilateral security arrangements rather than in unilateral ways," he told *Newsweek*.

While Japan's policy shift was not the cause of armament in the region, it could help to speed that up if not drive an arms race, Yuan said.

As Japan seeks to win friends and build influence, it is also putting weight on economic development. Plans include a new $30 billion investment framework for Africa and some $75 billion devoted to an array of projects across Southeast Asia, including rail infrastructure, clean energy development and joint maritime security mechanisms.

When hosting the largely Western G7 in Hiroshima last year, Kishida made the point of inviting two representatives of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Indonesia and Vietnam.

While a recent survey by Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute shows China has eclipsed the U.S. in terms of which superpower the ASEAN nations would choose if forced to align with one or the other, Japan was chosen as the region's most trusted nation, ahead of both the U.S. and China.

In a sign of Japan's readiness to strengthen ties in the region, Kishida participated in the first-ever trilateral meeting of its kind with Biden and Philippines President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos. Earlier in the month, Kishida and Prabowo Subianto, president-elect of regional giant Indonesia, agreed to strengthen security and other cooperation.

China, North Korea and segments of South Korea's society remain suspicious of Japan—in the case of the former two because of its friendship with the U.S. as well as its past, said Ja Ian Chong of the National University of Singapore. But attitudes are different elsewhere in Taiwan and Southeast Asia, he said.

"They may be more eager to encourage greater Japanese participation in regional affairs, given a high degree of trust in Japan from decades of cooperation and view that Tokyo has a major role in supplementing regional stability," he told *Newsweek*. "Japan will have to be careful not to unnecessarily increase friction with some of its Northeast Asian neighbors while defending its own interests and working with its partners."

Kishida has done much to renew relations with South Korea since taking office. He has also said he could consider unprecedented face-to-face talks with North Korean Supreme Leader [*Kim Jong Un*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/kim-jong-un?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) to ease rising tensions with the longtime foe, whose nuclear and missile development he calls a threat to Japan and the world. The possibility of such a meeting, Kishida said, was discussed in Washington and in ongoing consultations with Seoul.

"We are working toward resolving various issues and contemplating a holding of a summit meeting and we will continue to make efforts to enable this," Kishida said. Talks also continue on a trilateral meeting between Japan, South Korea and China in May.

At a time that Kishida has accused Beijing of intensifying a "unilateral attempt to change the status quo" in the East China Sea, the site of disputed islands known as Senkaku or Diaoyu claimed by both China and Japan, he emphasized that, "we will assert what needs to be asserted, but we will value dialogues as well."

**The Abe Doctrine**

Kishida's parallel efforts on diplomatic and military fronts follow in part from his previous experience. He served as foreign minister and, briefly, as acting defense minister under the late, influential Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

Abe, an avowed nationalist who became Japan's longest-serving premier before being forced to resign in 2019 amid corruption scandals and reports of ill-health, was the first to oversee the major changes in Japan's military mindset and developed the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" concept which is now ubiquitous in U.S. strategy documents and a cornerstone of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad, consisting of Australia, India, Japan and the U.S.

Kishida took office in 2021 following the resignation of Abe's immediate successor, [*Yoshihide Suga*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/yoshihide-suga?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), and is widely seen as continuing the legacy of Abe, whose 2022 assassination by a gunman with a grudge against him shocked Japan. "Japan is now sustaining and leading the liberal international order in Asia. It is in Japan's interest and the interests of the region," Nobukatsu Kanehara, who served as Abe's assistant chief cabinet secretary and deputy national security adviser, told *Newsweek*.

"People are all equal and free and they have rights to pursue their own happiness. This individual freedom fits very much with Samurai spirits of the Japanese."

Like Abe, who, in 2015, was the last Japanese premier to visit Washington, D.C., Kishida took the opportunity during his trip to address a joint session of [*Congress*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/congress?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), making the case for forging an even closer alliance with the U.S. "I was able to gain broad support, applause and the opinions from Congressional members," Kishida said.

**Threats From Within**

There is less applause at home, where Kishida faces a potential fight over party leadership. The LDP's hold on power is not challenged by weak opposition parties and no parliamentary election is required before 2025, but Kishida's approval rating of just 20 percent means he could be ousted at internal party elections, said Daniel Russel, a veteran U.S. diplomat who now serves as vice president for international security and diplomacy at the Asia Society, told *Newsweek*. "His immediate challenge is remaining in office beyond September," Russel said.

On the economic front, Japan has dropped below Germany's output for the first time since the 1960s to become only the world's fourth biggest economy. A declining, aging population is a weight on an economy that has pivoted toward inflation after 30 years of deflation, often referred to as "the lost decades." Kishida said he sought to ignite what he called a "virtuous cycle" by promoting investment through tax-exempt initiatives such as the Nippon Individual Savings Account, promoting both price and wage increases and devoting trillions of yen toward "green development," or "GX," and "digital development," or "DX."

He said that digitalization and increased support for child-rearing families could help offset the demographic crisis. These initiatives are all part of what Kishida refers to as a "new form of capitalism" for which he counts some early successes: including the Nikkei 225 hitting a 35-year record this year.

Yet there is an even more controversial measure that Kishida must consider when it comes to Japan's future: immigration.

In need of labor to fuel Japan's economic growth, Kishida says the Diet, Japan's national legislature, is debating a bill to "create a new system to have motivated people from overseas work in Japan."

The archipelago nation's reluctance to open its borders dates back millennia. Japan fended off Mongol invaders from China in the 13th century and is one of just a handful of nations to have avoided European colonization. Today, Japan eagerly welcomes millions of visitors from around the world, including a growing number of foreign workers, but it remains one of the world's most homogeneous countries, with an estimated 98.5 percent of its population being ethnically Japanese.

"There are still some in Japanese society who are resistant to the idea of continuous, indefinite immigration of labor from overseas," Kishida said, distinguishing the current plans to import more foreign labor from a "full-fledged immigration concept."

Kishida voices confidence in the path Japan is taking under his leadership, but also warns that there can be no underestimation of the daunting social, economic, diplomatic and military challenges it faces.

"In terms of diplomacy as well as security, we are in a very uncertain situation. Therefore, diplomacy, the leader-level diplomacy shall be strengthened," Kishida said. "We need to have defense capabilities as to back up this diplomacy. So even in uncertain times, Japan can fulfill our role to achieve stability."

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2383150/cover-japan-pm-banner.jpg)

**Graphic**

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