Policy Implications of Shigeru Ishiba's Premiership

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In late September 2024, Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) held leadership elections to replace the outgoing Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who had resigned due to a corruption scandal. A tight race between the two frontrunners had former Minister of Defense Shigeru Ishiba beating Sanae Takaichi, the then-Minister of State of Economic Security. Having won the LDP leadership election, Ishiba led the party through an October snap election shortly after becoming Prime Minister. Despite winning a majority of seats, the LDP suffered its second-worst result in history. Ishiba,

however, proceeded to be elected by the Diet to lead a minority government and form the incumbent cabinet in Japan.

What does the Ishiba premiership mean for Japan's standing on the global stage? From early on in his political career, Ishiba appears to have placed high importance on alliances by proposing an Asian NATO, which has been met with skepticism from other regional power players, including the United States. Ishiba also desires to integrate security frameworks in the Indo-Pacific region, such as the ANZUS Treaty, the US-Japan Alliance, and the US-South Korea Alliance. All of these frameworks involve mutual defense commitments, US military presence, nuclear deterrence, and joint exercises. However, unlike NATO, the US-Japan and US-South Korea alliances do not bind Japan and South Korea to defend the US, but rather to open their territory for US strategic purposes.

As Donald Trump was openly hostile towards American allies such as Canada and Denmark at the beginning of his second term as President of the United States, much concern shifted to how Trump would act towards traditional American allies in Asia. Ishiba prioritized maintaining the US-Japan alliance during the Trump administration to usher in a "golden era" for US-Japan relations. Trump provided security assurances and praised the country for boosting its defense spending.

On an Asian front, while expressing concerns about military actions by the People's Republic of China (PRC), Ishiba also signals a willingness to maintain dialogue and improve relations with the PRC. Regarding Japan's defense policy, Ishiba seeks to amend Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, which renounces war and prohibits Japan from maintaining its military forces. Amending the constitution with subtle re-wording would allow Japan's Self-Defense Forces to increase their capability and become an offensive military force rather than purely existing for the defense of Japan.

To conclude, Prime Minister Ishiba's foreign and defensive policy is characterized by seeking stronger relations with its traditional ally, the United States while maintaining dialogue with its regional rival, the PRC. Ishiba seeks to bolster not only Japan's defense, but also that of the entire region. It is clear that Ishiba has a vision for a safe, Free and Open Indo-Pacific. His government is still young and has not had the opportunity to make a change, but as a former defense minister, his policies seem logical. His biggest hurdles will be implementing policy, given his government's minority status, and convincing allies about his goals.