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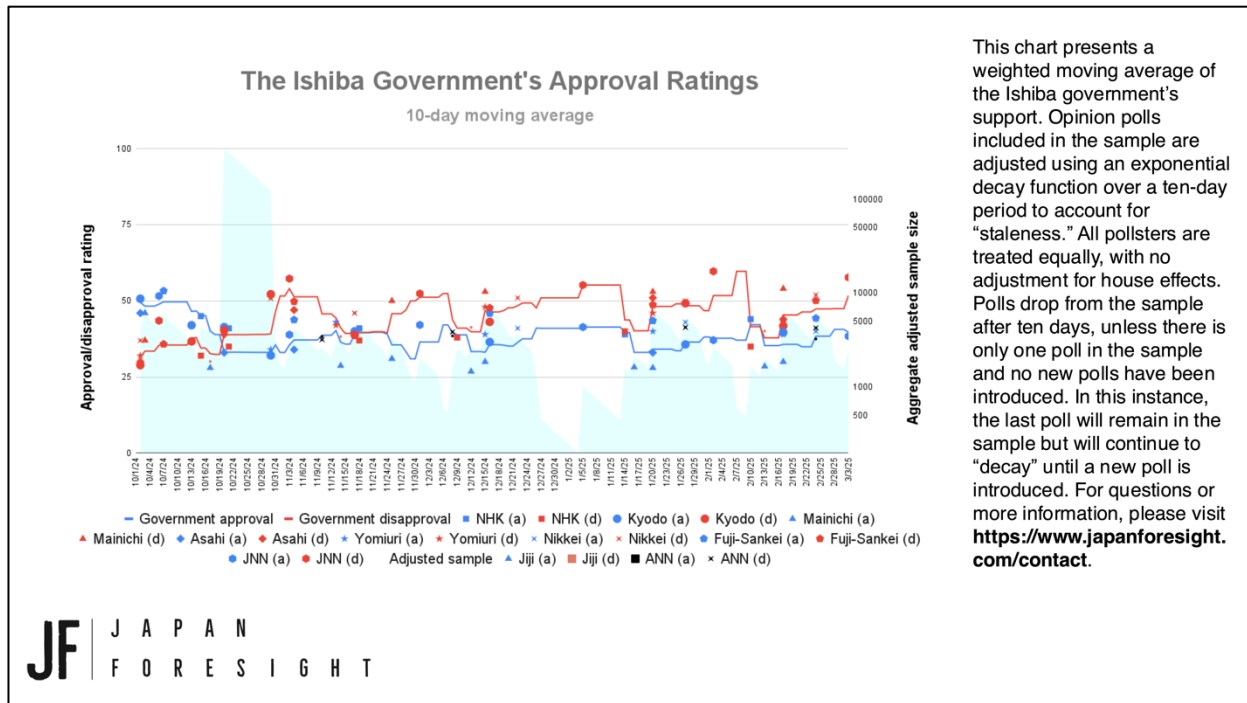
Field notes: Holding pattern in Tokyo

I arrived in Tokyo for an eighteen-day visit on 23 February. This note summarizes the findings from my first week of meetings with politicians, bureaucrats, academics, and other experts. I will provide additional field notes at the conclusion of my trip.

“The calm before the storm.” This was the phrase one of my interlocutors used to characterize the situation in Tokyo as February gave way to March.

At one level, there is little reason for despair. After all, Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru **achieved two crucial victories in February**. He had a **successful summit with Donald Trump**, which at the very least showed that the prime minister could hold his own alongside the US president, traditionally one of the most fundamental duties expected of Japan’s prime minister. Then, in the final days of the month, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Kōmeitō concluded **an agreement with Ishin no Kai** that for a relatively modest price tag – phasing out secondary school tuition fees, phasing in universal school lunches, and making certain commitments to controlling healthcare costs – Ishin no Kai would support the budget’s passage through the House of Representatives. After months of negotiations with multiple potential partners, the government finally secured the necessary votes.

With his approval ratings mostly steady, these achievements have all but assured that Ishiba will remain in power long enough to lead the LDP into the upper house elections in July. Ishiba’s victories at home and abroad have deprived his rivals in the LDP of ammunition that they could use to unseat him before the elections.



And yet despite Ishiba's productive February, the theme running through virtually all of my meetings in Tokyo has been a sense that **Japan is in a holding pattern while it waits for events to unfold**. Domestically, the political system is in a **holding pattern until the upper house elections**. Notwithstanding Ishiba's political victories, there is widespread dissatisfaction with his leadership (in multiple conversations I heard about the weakness of the prime minister's office, in particular the absence of a "Team Ishiba" comparable to some of his predecessors' administrations) and dissatisfaction with the prime minister's economic policy agenda, or lack thereof. Meanwhile, despite his government's agreement with *Ishin no Kai*, **the government was still unable to move the budget through the House of Representatives before 2 March** – the vote is scheduled for 4 March – meaning that for the budget to be passed before the end of the fiscal year, it will have to be positively approved by the House of Councillors. While the ruling coalition has the necessary votes in the upper house, the tighter schedule gives the government less margin for error, meaning a new scandal or gaffe could prevent the budget's passage before the end of March.

Of course, Ishiba is also laboring under **the widespread assumption that he will lead the LDP to defeat in the upper house elections**. While there is some debate over what "defeat" could mean – any reduction in the ruling coalition's majority or the outright loss of the majority – LDP lawmakers seem resigned to the government's emerging from the elections with a weaker hold over the upper house, at which point the LDP will, depending on the results, be freer either to switch leaders or pursue negotiations for an expanded coalition with one or more opposition parties. Among LDP lawmakers, I have heard a strong sense of resignation that the party will go into the upper house campaign on the defensive because of **ongoing public concerns about inflation**, with the

implication that much of the government's efforts in the coming months will be trying to send a clear message on combating rising prices.

Even as the political system waits to see the balance of power that emerges from the upper house elections, **the overwhelming preoccupation of political Tokyo is the relationship with the United States.** It quickly became apparent that while Ishiba's work paid off for his meeting at the White House with Trump, his relationship with Trump is in, to borrow the baseball metaphor used by one of my interlocutors, "the early innings." While Ishiba has not been blamed for failing to head off the [tariffs](#) announced soon after his trip to the United States – including steel and aluminum, automobiles, and "reciprocal" tariffs – there is a sense of fatalism while the government waits to see whether Mutō Yōji, the minister of economy, trade, and industry, is able to secure any exemptions when he travels to the United States next week.

Beyond the possible tariffs, there is a certain disquiet among the officials with whom I have spoken over the past week. On the one hand, with the Trump administration more focused on Europe and the Middle East – as well as its domestic priorities – there is a sense that for the time being the bilateral security relationship is satisfactory, with interlocutors pointing to the text of the Ishiba-Trump joint statement, the Quad foreign ministers meeting on 21 January, and the early visits by both Ishiba and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi as signs that the Trump administration may in fact be prepared to "pivot" to Asia even as it reduces US commitments elsewhere.

However, the same officials did express concern that domestic "chaos" could limit the administration's capacity for meeting challenges in East Asia and conversations with politicians following the 28 February meeting between Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy suggest that there is a growing sense that the Trump administration is preparing not to pivot to East Asia but rather to upend the prevailing world order entirely. One interlocutor referred to Trump as acting like a "gangster" – a depiction which NHK also used *before* the meeting with Zelenskyy – and suggested that an order based on the rule of law is giving way to an order based purely on power, which will necessarily mean that Japan will have to do more to defend itself.

For the moment, however, **the Ishiba government is in a defensive crouch.** The government will not preemptively distance itself from the United States as long as there is reason to hope for the Trump administration to hold the line in East Asia. Meanwhile, officials I spoke with discussed a desire to work with the European Union and other partners to defend a rules-based trading system – which could also include expanding the Trans-Pacific Partnership – but it is difficult to act on this agenda before the full scope of the Trump administration's trade policy is clear. Finally, even as the Ishiba government has continued to voice its support for Ukraine, in parliamentary debate on 3 March Ishiba tried to avoid taking sides in the dispute between Trump and Zelenskyy, suggesting that the desire to safeguard the relationship with the US could constrain Japan's foreign policies in other ways.

The consensus remains that in the near term there is no alternative to the alliance with the United States for Japan's security – but I have heard from interlocutors both within the government and Diet and outside it that there are conversations about what alternatives could exist, including both for Japan to defend itself and for deepening international partnerships with Europe, other Asian democracies, and perhaps even China. The state of Japan's political system – the weakened minority government, the fractious LDP, and the divided opposition parties – could influence the government's choices, while the changes in the international system may have as-yet-unknown effects on the balance of power domestically.

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