

The Weekly Observer

July 19-23, 2021

The 13th edition of the weekly newsletter aggregating news on Japanese politics! This week focuses on the spread of the “delta” variant, government efforts to resolve vaccine shortages, the Japan-U.S.-ROK deputy-level meeting, Japan-ROK relations, the opposition demands for out-of-session examinations, the Basic Energy Plan draft, the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games, preparation for Lower House and LDP Presidential elections, and more.

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I. News of the Week

1. Case Numbers Soar and “Delta” Variant Becomes Dominant Strain

- On Thursday, 5,381 new cases were confirmed nationwide, topping 5,000 for the first time in two months. There were 392 patients with severe symptoms.
- Tokyo recorded 1,979 cases, an increase of 671 cases from Thursday last week. Those in their twenties accounted for the most cases overall at 658.
- Data predicts nearly 60 percent of total cases in Tokyo are the “delta” variant, thought to have a stronger transmissibility rate.
- Data presented at Wednesday’s health ministry COVID-19 advisory board meeting showed that case numbers nationwide rapidly increased 1.53 times in the week leading up to Tuesday compared to the previous week.
- The Tokyo Metropolitan Government’s expert panel expects more than 2,400 new cases a day on a seven-day average in August. Kyoto University professor Hiroshi Nishiura’s calculations show that if cases increase at 1.3 times the current pace, Tokyo will reach 3,000 cases a day on August 7 and 5,235 cases on August 21.

2. Government Working to Resolve Supply Shortage

- Vaccine czar Taro Kono said Wednesday that the government will distribute enough vaccines to inoculate 80 percent of individuals above the age of 12 twice by early October.
- Health Minister Norihisa Tamura announced Tuesday that Japan signed a contract with Moderna and Takeda Pharmaceutical Company to receive an additional 50 million doses of the Moderna vaccine as early as the start of next year.
- Japan is already set to receive 50 million doses by the end of September for mass vaccination sites and workplace vaccination. Tamura explained that the additional doses may be used to inoculate those who received two shots with a third shot.
- The government will receive around 220 million doses of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines by the end of September. Minister Kono stressed on Sunday that there will be enough supply for everyone who wants to get vaccinated.
- On Saturday, Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said he hoped 50 percent of the population will receive their first vaccination by the end of July. As of July 15, 32 percent of the population had received their first shot.

3. Japan-U.S. Relations

- Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi had a phone call with Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Friday. The two discussed a range of global issues from China to the pandemic and agreed to lead efforts to achieve a free and open Indo-Pacific.
- On Wednesday, Japan, the U.S. and South Korea held their first deputy-level meeting since October 2017 in Tokyo. Participants were Vice Foreign Minister Takeo Mori, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and First Vice Minister Choi Jong Kun.
- They discussed the shared commitment to work toward the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and their intent to address the threat posed by North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile program.
- Vice Foreign Minister Mori and Deputy Secretary Sherman also held a bilateral meeting, in which the two agreed to strengthen the alliance and work together closely on global issues from achieving FOIP to the coronavirus response.
- The two also confirmed strong opposition to Chinese unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the East and South China Seas, as well as the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.
- Takeo Akiba, the new national security secretariat (NSS) secretary-general, had his first phone call with National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan on Tuesday. The two agreed to work closely with each other, the Quad and other like-minded countries to respond to the various regional and global issues they face today.

4. Foreign and Defense Policy Developments

- On Wednesday, Vice Foreign Minister Mori held a bilateral meeting with South Korea's First Vice Minister Choi Jong Kun. The two sides failed to reach an agreement on resolving the disagreement over historical issues including the comfort women and wartime labor.
- At a meeting held by the LDP Foreign Affairs Division and others on Tuesday, some lawmakers called on the government to diplomatically boycott the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics over the alleged human rights violations in Xinjiang.
- The Blue House announced on Monday that South Korean President Moon Jae-in is cancelling his trip to Japan for the opening ceremony of the Olympics because a summit with Suga would not deliver sufficient results.
- Reports surfaced that Hirohisa Soma, deputy chief of mission at the Japanese embassy in Seoul, told reporters that President Moon is in a tug-of-war only with himself over frayed ties between the two countries, using a sexually explicit expression. The government is contemplating his reassignment.

- At the Japan-U.K. defense ministers meeting on Tuesday, Defense Secretary Ben Wallace told Minister Kishi that the U.K. will permanently deploy two patrol vessels to the Indo-Pacific following the deployment of a carrier strike group led by HMS Queen Elizabeth.

5. Domestic Political Developments

- The government announced Wednesday that its vaccine passport can be used in seven countries including Italy and South Korea (which will require separate documents to qualify for relaxed measures).
- The LDP and CDP agreed on Wednesday to hold an out-of-session examination (*heikaichū shinsa*) next Wednesday and Thursday in the Cabinet Committee of both Houses to discuss the country's coronavirus response.
- The opposition want to question the government's lax coronavirus countermeasures for the Olympics too.
- CDP leader Yukio Edano criticized the government on Sunday, stating that the ruling coalition was violating the constitution by ignoring the opposition's request to hold a Diet session.
- The opposition invoked Article 53, which says the cabinet must hold a session if a quarter or more of total members of either House requests a session. The ruling coalition maintains that out-of-session examination will suffice.

6. State of the Economy

- *Nikkei Asia* reported Wednesday that Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. (TSMC), the world's largest chipmaker, is finalizing a decision to begin operating its first chip plant in Japan as early as 2023.
- The plant is expected to be mainly used to make image sensors for Sony, TSMC's largest Japanese customer.
- The Cabinet Office revealed on Wednesday its new calculations for Japan's primary balance. Even assuming high growth rates continue, primary balance will be achieved in FY 2027, two years later than the government's target.
- The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry released on Wednesday a draft of the government's "Basic Energy Plan" to be revised over the summer.
- In it, the government raises the ratio of renewable energy in 2030's energy mix from the current 22-24 percent to 36-38 percent. It maintained the ratio of nuclear energy at 20-22 percent, while reducing thermal by 15 percent.

7. Olympic Games Officially Start on Friday

- The opening ceremony of the Olympic Games was held on Friday night at the New National Stadium in Tokyo. Emperor Naruhito declared the games open.
- The organizing committee announced on Friday morning that a total of 106 Olympic-related coronavirus cases have been confirmed. There were 19 cases on Friday, the most confirmed in a single day.
- On Thursday, Kentaro Kobayashi, the show director of the opening ceremony, was dismissed after footage from the 1990s showed him making jokes about the Holocaust.
- Suga said Wednesday that if the coronavirus situation improves, he hopes to have spectators in attendance for the Paralympic Games which start on August 24. Komeito leader Natsuo Yamaguchi made the same statement on Sunday.
- In a *Wall Street Journal* interview on Tuesday, Suga defended his decision to hold the games during a pandemic, saying Japan has a fraction of the coronavirus cases of Western countries and is more disciplined in preventing infections.¹
- On Monday, composer Keigo Oyamada, also known as Cornelius, resigned following reports that he had revealed in magazine interviews from more than twenty years ago that he bullied classmates with disabilities at school.

8. Suga Prepares for “Double Election” in the Fall

- Of the 289 single-member districts (SMDs) in the upcoming Lower House election, the LDP has already decided on 260 of the 280 candidates it plans to field. It will leave nine districts to Komeito, its coalition partner.
- Meanwhile, the opposition is also deciding on its candidates: the Constitutional Democratic Party has decided on 211 candidates, the Communist Party on 124, the Japan Innovation Party on 64, the Democratic People’s Party on 21, Reiwa Shinsengumi on 20 and the Social Democratic Party on ten candidates.
- The CDP and JCP are competing for 70 seats at the moment, but the parties will continue arrangements to unify behind a single candidate as much as possible. The CDP is keen on working with the JCP due to its voting block, which garners around 15,000-20,000 votes per SMD.
- *Yomiuri* reported that of the 176 seats up for grabs in the proportional representation block, 74 candidates that are not running in the SMDs have been announced as official party candidates.
- Prime Minister Suga indicated on a TV program last Friday that he will announce his reelection bid for the LDP presidency “when the time comes.”

¹ Peter Landers, “Japanese Leader Yoshihide Suga Says Country Is Safe for Olympics.” *Wall Street Journal*, July 21, 2021.

- LDP Acting Secretary-General Seiko Noda said the same day that she is interested in running for the presidency, showing confidence that she can win over the vote of women in the party.

9. Other Noteworthy News

- **Candidate Backed by LDP and Ishin Wins Hyogo Governor Race:** Sunday's race for the governorship of Hyogo was the first one in twenty years that newcomers fought for an open seat. Incumbent Governor Toshizo Ido had served for five terms before announcing last December that he would not be seeking reelection. Even before the announcement, Ido made moves to get the LDP to back his former deputy governor Kazuo Kanagawa, but to no avail. In the end, the LDP remained divided on who to endorse and ended up backing two candidates. The party headquarters backed Motohiko Saito, an independent endorsed by the Japan Innovation Party (Nippon Ishin no Kai) which has its primary support base in Osaka, a neighbor of Hyogo. Party leadership from both parties, including Osaka Governor Hirofumi Yoshimura, all came to support Saito and drew in votes. Unlike these national figures, a large portion of local LDP lawmakers decided to back Ido's preferred candidate. At stump speeches on the campaign trail, Ido himself strongly criticized the Saito camp, asking voters whether it was alright for Tokyo to be dominating local politics. He added criticism of Ishin by saying Saito would be selling Hyogo out to Osaka. By the end of the day, it was clear that Saito's pledge to renew the local government was more appealing than Kanagawa's plan for the prefecture. He ended up winning by more than 250,000 votes and is the new governor of Hyogo. Saito is now tied with Chiba Governor Toshihito Kumagai as the second youngest governor in the country. Although a local race, the splintered support among LDP headquarters and the local chapter ahead of a consequential national election raises some concerns about the ability of the party to come together to maintain its majority in the Lower House.

II. Public Opinion Polls

- An *Asahi Shimbun* poll released Monday showed a 31 percent approval rating for the Suga cabinet, down 3 percent from June, and a disapproval rating of 49 percent, up 7 percent.²
 - 26 percent of respondents approve of the government's coronavirus measures, down 6 percent from June, while 65 percent disapprove, up 10 percent.
 - 33 percent of respondents believe the fourth state of emergency in Tokyo will have a "great" or "somewhat great" effect on mitigating the spread of the virus, while 66 percent believe it will have "little" to "no" effect.

² "Gorin, Sansei Sanjūsan Pāsento/Hantai Gojūgo Pāsento Anzen, Anshin no Taikai 'Dekinai' Rokujū-hachi Pāsento Asahi Shimbunsha Yoron Chōsa 五輪、賛成33%・反対55% 安全、安心の大会「できない」68% 朝日新聞社世論調査" [33% in Favor/55% Oppose Olympics 68% Don't Believe a Safe and Secure Games are Possible Asahi Shimbun Opinion Poll], *Asahi Shimbun*, July 19, 2021, <https://www.asahi.com/articles/DA3S14979064.html>

- 51 percent of respondents said the debacle over the government's policies banning the sale of liquor heightened distrust for the Suga Cabinet, while 45 percent said it wasn't that impactful.
 - 54 percent of respondents "strongly" (7→6) or "somewhat strongly" (54→47) approve the government's vaccination program, while 44 percent "somewhat" (30→33) or "strongly" (8→11) disapprove.
 - 63 percent of respondents believe the government is largely responsible for the temporary stop on vaccine reservations at local municipalities and workplaces due to a supply shortage, while 32 percent believe it isn't entirely at fault.
 - 33 percent of respondents support the decision to hold the Olympic Games, while 55 percent oppose it.
 - 21 percent of respondents believe the Olympic/Paralympic Games will be "safe and secure" like Suga said, while 68 percent believe it won't be.
 - 54 percent of respondents want Suga to continue as prime minister until the end of his term as LDP president in September; 27 percent want him to step down now; and 14 percent want him to continue beyond his term.
- The survey also collected data on the latest approval ratings of political parties.

Party Name	Approval Rate (%)
Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)	30 (-1)
Komeito (coalition partner of the LDP)	3 (-1)
Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP)	6 (±0)
Nippon Ishin no Kai (Japan Innovation Party)	1 (-1)
Democratic Party for the People (DPP)	0 (-1)
Japanese Communist Party (JCP)	3 (±0)
Social Democratic Party (SDP)	0 (±0)
Reiwa Shinsengumi	0 (±0)
Independents	48 (+3)

- A *Mainichi Shimbun* poll released Sunday showed a 30 percent approval rating for the Suga cabinet, down 4 percent from June, and a disapproval rating of 62 percent, up 7 percent and the worst since it was formed in September.³
 - 19 percent of respondents approve of the government's coronavirus response, while 63 percent disapprove.

³ "Suga Naikaku Shijiritsu Saitei Sanjū Pāsento Sake Torihiki Taiō 'Mondai' Nanajūyon Ppāsento Mainichi Shimbun Yoron Chōsa 菅内閣支持率最低30% 酒取引対応「問題」74% 毎日新聞世論調査" [Suga Cabinet Approval Rating at Lowest 30% 74% Find Liquor Ban Response Problematic Mainichi Shimbun Opinion Poll], *Mainichi Shimbun*, July 18, 2021, <https://mainichi.jp/articles/20210718/ddm/001/010/135000c>