

The Weekly Observer

January 31-February 4, 2022

The 22nd edition of the weekly newsletter aggregating news on Japanese politics! This week focuses on the COVID-19 situation, Rahm Emanuel's meeting with the prime minister and foreign minister, a host of bilateral and trilateral meetings with the U.S. and South Korea, Japan's possible role in the Ukraine situation, Japan's response to North Korea's frequent missile tests, the Diet resolution on human rights, the economic security bill draft, tensions among ruling and opposition parties ahead of the summer election, former Tokyo governor Ishihara's death, five ex-PMs' controversial anti-nuclear letter to the EU, Japan-ROK tensions over a UNESCO heritage site recommendation, and more.

By Content

I. News of the Week

1. Government Considers Extending COVID-19 Pre-Emergency Measures
2. Government Rushes to Speed Up Booster Shots
3. U.S.-Japan This Week: Rahm Emanuel and Foreign Ministers' Meeting
4. Foreign Policy Developments
5. Defense/Security Developments
6. Lower House Passes Human Rights Resolution
7. State of the Economy
8. Government Expert Panel Drafts Economic Security Bill
9. Conflict Among Ruling and Opposition Parties Ahead of Summer Election
10. Other Political Developments
11. Other Noteworthy News
 - a. Ex-PMs' Anti-Nuclear Letter to EU Comes Under Fire
 - b. Another Japan-South Korea Historical Spat Arises Over World Heritage Bid

II. Public Opinion Polls

1. Nikkei (1/30)

I. News of the Week

1. Government Considers Extending COVID-19 Pre-Emergency Measures

- Next week, the government is [expected](#) to consider extending the pre-emergency measures (*man-en bōshi-tō jūten sochi*) set to expire on Feb. 13 in 13 prefectures.¹
- *Mainichi* [reported](#) on Monday (Feb. 7) that the government is likely to extend measures until March 6 in an effort to reduce the burden on medical institutions.
- On Monday (Jan. 31), Prime Minister Kishida Fumio [said](#) that he does not expect to declare a state of emergency in Tokyo, despite hospital bed occupancy rates reaching close to 50 percent (a condition to consider declaring a SOE).
- The government [plans](#) to closely monitor the occupancy rates for beds reserved for patients with severe symptoms, which it believes is relatively open compared to last summer. Tokyo's occupancy rate [topped](#) 50 percent on Tuesday.
- On Thursday, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government [decided](#) on its new standard for requesting the government to declare a state of emergency. The TMG will request a SOE when 30-40 percent of patients require oxygen and when the seven-day average reaches 24,000 cases.

2. Government Rushes to Speed Up Booster Shots

- On Feb. 7, Prime Minister Kishida [issued](#) an order instructing cabinet members to work toward speeding up vaccination rates to 1 million shots per day this month.
- [Booster shots](#) for medical personnel and the elderly have begun, but only 28-30 percent in these categories have been vaccinated. Reports [suggest](#) the abrupt change in booster schedules has contributed to slow distribution of vaccine tickets among municipalities.
- Regional disparities are [significant](#), with Okayama completing 47.7 percent of its vaccinations while five prefectures are still below the 20 percent mark.
- Kishida [said](#) on Monday (Jan. 31) that the government would support the acceleration of vaccinations for the rest of the population if reservations are available and six months have passed since the second shot. Tokyo [began](#) accepting 4,320 reservations for the Jan. 31-Feb. 5 period.
- Meanwhile, the health ministry expert committee is [expected to decide](#) on Feb. 10 whether to approve Pfizer's oral antiviral treatment "[Paxlovid](#)". Health Minister Goto Shigeyuki [said](#) Monday that the GOJ agreed to purchase enough supply for 2 million people.

¹ 13 prefectures include: Tokyo, Saitama, Chiba, Kanagawa, Gunma, Niigata, Aichi, Gifu, Mie, Kagawa, Nagasaki, Kumamoto and Nagasaki. A total of 34 prefectures are under pre-emergency measures.

3. U.S.-Japan This Week: Rahm Emanuel and Foreign Ministers' Meeting

- New Ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel met with Prime Minister Kishida on [Friday](#) and with Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa on [Tuesday](#).
- Kishida and Ambassador Emanuel exchanged views on regional issues including Japan-U.S. relations, China and North Korea, as well as cooperation toward a world without nuclear weapons.
- Hayashi and Ambassador Emanuel [agreed](#) to cooperate closely on common security issues and continue working to achieve a free and open Indo-Pacific.
- Hayashi also [spoke](#) with Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Wednesday. The two discussed a range of issues from North Korea's missile tests to China's maritime activities to concern over Russia's presence on the border of Ukraine.

4. Foreign Policy Developments

- Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry Hagiuda Koichi [said](#) Friday that the GOJ will consider ways in which it can contribute to the world as one of the largest LNG importers amid heightening tensions in Ukraine.
- The Biden administration [requested](#) earlier that Japan divert some LNG to Europe if the situation in Ukraine leads to disruption in supplies.
- Russian Ambassador to Japan Mikhail Galuzin [warned](#) at a press conference on Wednesday that Japanese sanctions on Russia over the Ukraine situation would have adverse effects on Russo-Japanese relations.
- On Friday, the U.S. Department of State [announced](#) that a Japan-U.S.-ROK trilateral foreign ministers' meeting will take place on Feb. 12 in Hawaii.
- Foreign Minister Hayashi [spoke](#) on the phone with South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong on Thursday. The two [confirmed](#) the need for closer bilateral and trilateral cooperation with the U.S. to deal with North Korea.
- A Japan, U.S. and South Korea vice minister-level meeting was [held](#) on Wednesday to discuss ways to respond to North Korea's missile tests and work toward its complete denuclearization in line with UN Security Council resolution.²

5. Defense/Security Developments

- Defense officials from Japan, the U.S. and South Korea [held](#) a phone conference on Friday to discuss North Korean affairs amid a fresh round of missile tests.³

² The meeting was attended by Vice Foreign Minister Mori Takeo, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, and ROK First Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong Kun.

³ The meeting was attended by Director General for Defense Policy Masuda Kazuo, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Ely Ratner, and Deputy Minister for National Defense Policy Kim Man-gi.

- The officials agreed to continue arrangements for a trilateral defense ministers' meeting to discuss the matter.
- In response to North Korea's missile tests, the government [plans](#) to strengthen monitoring as well as coordination with the international community to encourage Pyongyang to exercise self control.
- On Sunday, North Korea [launched](#) what is viewed as an intermediate-range ballistic missile that flew around 800 kilometers at an altitude of 2,000 kilometers.
- Tokyo remains concerned, as it is the [seventh missile test](#) conducted by Pyongyang this year. This was the first time since Nov. 2017 that a lofted projectile missile flew over an altitude of 2,000 kilometers.

6. Lower House Passes Human Rights Resolution

- At Tuesday's House of Representatives plenary session, the lower house [passed](#) a resolution expressing concern about the "serious human rights situation" in Xinjiang, Tibet, Inner Mongolia and Hong Kong.
- Although it does not name China, the resolution [recognizes](#) changing the status quo by force as a threat to the international community, and strongly urges that an explanation for these actions be provided to the international community.
- Reports [claim](#) Komeito played a significant role in watering down the language from "human rights violation" to "human rights situation," and scrapping mention of any condemnation within the text. Reports also [state](#) that some LDP and opposition lawmakers wanted China to be named in the resolution.
- The resolution was [brought forth](#) by a cross-party group of lawmakers spearheaded by the Diet Federation Supporting Inner Mongolia, led by LDP Policy Research Council Chair Takaichi Sanae.
- There were two failed attempts in the past: one in April 2021 before the Biden-Suga summit and one in Dec. 2021 during the extraordinary Diet session.
- A spokesperson for China's foreign ministry [issued](#) a statement on Tuesday criticizing it as "extremely malicious and interfering with domestic affairs."

7. State of the Economy

- A study released by the Japan International Cooperation Agency on Thursday [showed](#) that Japan will need 6.74 million foreign workers in 2040 to achieve its growth targets. This is four times the current level.
- The study estimates that Japan will fall short by 420,000 foreign workers in 2040. Vietnam is projected to remain the biggest source of labor, accounting for 28 percent of all foreign workers.

- According to data [released](#) by the internal affairs ministry, December's unemployment rate was 2.7 percent, a 0.1 percent improvement from November. The number of unemployed people has gone down for a sixth straight month.
- On Tuesday, Kishida [convened](#) the Council for Science, Technology and Innovation, and said the GOJ plans to submit a bill this Diet session establishing a ¥10 trillion fund to support universities conducting world-class research.
- Kishida said that Japan will contribute to solving social issues in digital, climate change, and economic security areas through the power of science, technology and innovation, while using these traditionally weak areas for Japan as a growth engine to create a sustainable economy and society.
- Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry Hagiuda [said](#) Tuesday that the GOJ has no plans at the moment to undo the freeze on the “trigger clause,” which cuts the additional tax rate (¥25/liter) on the gas tax (¥53.8/liter). Undoing the provision, which would lower gas prices, requires an amendment to the law.⁴ The GOJ is currently providing subsidies to producers.

8. Government Expert Panel Drafts Economic Security Bill

- On Friday, Prime Minister Kishida [ordered](#) cabinet ministers to expedite preparations to submit the economic security legislation.
- An expert panel prepared a proposal on Tuesday, which centered around [four pillars](#): 1) bolstering supply chains, 2) securing core infrastructure from cyber attacks, 3) public-private cooperation on emerging technologies, and 4) not disclosing patent requests for technology that can be diverted for military use.
- In particular, the first pillar includes financial support for businesses that are part of the supply chain for “specifically designated supplies” (*tokutei jūyō busshi*), which includes semiconductors and rare earths.
- The draft also [includes](#) legal ramifications of up to two years in prison for businesses and researchers that use foreign made “important systems” and don't comply with GOJ regulations.
- The penalty is applicable to companies in 14 industries related to basic infrastructure.⁵ The GOJ can order changes or reject project plans that must be submitted to the relevant ministries prior to implementation.

9. Conflict Among Ruling and Opposition Parties Ahead of Summer Election

⁴ The “trigger clause” comes into play when average gasoline prices rise above ¥160 for 3 consecutive months. It cuts the ¥25/liter added tax and reduces tax burden. The clause was “frozen” in 2011 when the DPJ found it necessary to gather tax revenue for reconstruction post-3.11.

⁵ The 14 industries include: utility companies (electric, gas, oil), sewage, telecommunications, broadcasting, mail, finance, credit card companies, rail, freight, shipping, airlines and airports.

- LDP Secretary General Motegi Toshimitsu and Komeito Secretary General Ishii Keiichi [met](#) on Wednesday but failed to come to an agreement over electoral cooperation in the House of Councillors election slated for the summer.
- The two parties are unlikely to endorse each other's candidates—LDP lawmakers in single-member districts and Komeito lawmakers in multi-member districts.
- Part of the reason for this tension is seen to be a loss of elder lawmakers who served as channels of communication between the parties. Other reasons include LDP concerns over losing seats to Komeito candidates backed by their party.
- Meanwhile, [opposition coordination](#) to unify behind a candidate in the 32 SMDs is not going well either, with only 8 candidates being officially confirmed.
- Tensions are rising between the CDP and JCP, especially after CDP leader Izumi Kenta [declared](#) on Monday that his party would drop talk of electoral cooperation with the JCP. [JCP leaders](#) have since come out criticizing the one-sided decision.

10. Other Political Developments

- On Thursday, the Kishida faction [overtook](#) the Nikai faction as the fourth largest faction within the LDP. The prime minister's faction now has 45 members.
- *Asahi Shimbun* [published](#) an article on Wednesday which projects that based on current population trends, the lower house will see a reallocation of 16 seats in 22 prefectures in 2040. Tokyo is projected to gain 8 seats for a total of 33 seats.
- On [Tuesday](#), former Tokyo governor Ishihara Shintaro passed away at 89. The former Diet member-turned-governor was best known as a writer and as the charismatic governor (1999-2012) who sought to “change Japan from Tokyo.”
- The education ministry [announced](#) on Tuesday that 400 foreign students will be permitted to enter the country this month. Since late last month, the GOJ has accepted 87 students funded by the government who are close to graduating.

11. Other Noteworthy News

- **Ex-PMs' Anti-Nuclear Letter to EU Comes Under Fire** : Former prime ministers Koizumi Junichiro, Kan Naoto, Hosokawa Morihiro, Hatoyama Yukio and Murayama Tomiichi [signed](#) a letter on Jan. 27 urging the EU to stop labeling nuclear power plants as green investments. In it, they [argue](#) that many children in Fukushima are suffering from thyroid cancer as a result of the 2011 nuclear accident. On Wednesday, Prime Minister Kishida [revealed](#) that Environment Minister Yamaguchi Tsuyoshi sent a letter to the prime ministers cautioning against the use of inappropriate expressions with regards to the link between thyroid cancer and radiation exposure. [Chief Cabinet Secretary Matsuno Hirokazu](#), [LDP policy chief Takaichi](#), and [Fukushima Governor Uchibori Masao](#) are among the other government and political leaders who have

protested the letter that they argue is based on incorrect information. In March last year, Koizumi and Kan [also urged](#) the GOJ to stop using nuclear power, saying the country should learn from the Fukushima crisis and turn to renewables. The government has since [explained](#) its official position to the EU ambassador to Japan.

- **Another Japan-South Korea Historical Spat Arises Over World Heritage Bid :** Japan and South Korea disagree once again on historical issues, this time over Japan's [recommendation](#) to get the Sado Island mine site in Niigata listed in the 2023 UNESCO World Heritage list. Prime Minister Kishida [made the announcement](#) on Jan. 28, drawing immediate backlash from South Korea, which urged Japan to stop attempting to list the site linked to what Seoul views as forced Korean laborers during World War II. The GOJ [maintains its position](#) that South Korea, not Japan, must make the appropriate decisions with regards to historical issues. [According to Niigata](#), the site has a history of outstanding mining technology development before and after industrialization and became one of the world's largest gold producers in the 17th century. The GOJ [reversed](#) its original position to delay recommendation after pressure from the LDP's conservative members led by former prime minister Abe Shinzo. [Abe](#) and others like [policy chief Takaichi](#) made public statements urging the GOJ to not delay the recommendation. The GOJ ended up making a [cabinet decision](#) on Tuesday confirming it will recommend the mine site to be listed as a world heritage site. The process, which [involves](#) a UNESCO advisory board surveying the site in the fall and making a decision around May next year, could be held up if UNESCO decides to shelve the screening process by calling for bilateral negotiations. During the foreign ministers' meeting on Thursday, Foreign Minister Hayashi [said](#) Tokyo is willing to discuss the matter with Seoul in good faith.

II. Public Opinion Polls

- A *Nikkei/TV Tokyo* [poll](#) released Sunday showed the Kishida Cabinet's approval rating was 59 percent, down 6 percent from December, while disapproval was 30 percent, up 4 percent.
 - 49 percent of respondents said "measures against the coronavirus" should be prioritized by the government, up 11 points from the previous survey; 38 percent said "economic recovery".
 - 37 percent of respondents said they supported the government because they had "confidence in character," while 26 percent said it was because of "stability".
 - 37 percent of respondents said they did not support the government because it is an "LDP-centered cabinet," while 32 percent said it was because the "government and party are poorly run".
 - 46 percent of respondents (+3 from Dec.) said they support the LDP; 10 percent (-3) said the Japan Innovation Party; 8 percent said the CDP (-2); and 24 percent (+4) said they did not support any party.