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Abe Resigns: Washington's Delicate Diplomatic Dance

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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's decision to resign today has thrown Japan's political scene into turmoil. Abe's announcement was not surprising, given the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) humiliating defeat in July 29 upper house elections, but the timing was unexpected, coming two days after Abe's pledge to fight to renew anti-terrorist legislation that is critical to the U.S.–Japanese alliance. Ichiro Ozawa, leader of the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), has vowed to block passage of the legislation to trigger a lower house election and gain the premiership for his party. Washington must recognize that change is afoot and tread carefully in its diplomacy, lest it needlessly strain its relationship with Tokyo.

Abe's Fall. On September 12, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe submitted his resignation to the LDP leadership "to take responsibility for causing political confusion," a reference to the LDP's humiliating loss of the upper house of parliament in July 29 elections. The LDP suffered from the electorate's anger over the government's loss of 50 million pension records and a series of scandals that led to the resignations or suicides of several cabinet ministers. Abe's August 27 reshuffle of the cabinet and LDP leadership caused a brief gain in public support, which had been plummeting since he assumed office in September 2006, but the goodwill generated by selecting respected government veterans was tarnished by subsequent scandals involving several ministers and senior officials.

Abe's speech to the opening session of the parliamentary Diet on September 10 suggested that he

was bracing for a high-stakes game of chicken with the opposition, placing all his political capital on renewing the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law by November 1, 2007. The law allows Japanese tankers to continue refueling Coalition naval forces in the Indian Ocean in support of operations in Afghanistan. The United States sees the legislation as critical to continuing the global war on terrorism and a test of Tokyo's relationship with Washington. Abe's defense and foreign affairs ministers pledged to alter the bill in an attempt to gain opposition support but were rebuffed by the DPJ. The opposition has also vowed to investigate allegations that the Maritime Self-Defense Forces may have refueled U.S. warships engaged in the war in Iraq, which is not permitted under the law.

A New Prime Minister, Old Challenges. The LDP will select a new prime minister on September 19, and the frontrunner is LDP General Secretary and former Minister of Foreign Affairs Taro Aso. He shares, and is likely to continue, Abe's conservative foreign policy. Although well respected, Aso will face the same obstacles as Abe in attempting to reverse flagging public support. The next prime minister may last only a few months in office.

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The effectiveness and tenure of Abe's successor will be determined by the degree to which he can assuage the electorate's anger at the LDP. The next prime minister must be seen as fixing the failed pension system and preventing further scandals involving senior officials. But the scope of the LDP's defeat in the July election, especially in its rural strongholds, reflected a deeper anguish over the disparate pain imposed by the economic reforms of Abe's predecessor, Junichiro Koizumi. A disenfranchised countryside felt bypassed by the national economic upturn and punished the LDP for cutting public works projects and tax transfers to local governments. The new prime minister must continue Abe's nascent efforts to respond to public concerns over economic disparities, especially in rural constituencies.

Aso also shares Abe's vision for a broader Japanese role in the region, which requires a revision to Article 9 of the Constitution—the so-called “pacifist clause”—and reinterpretation of the concept of collective self-defense. First, however, the next prime minister must respond to the electorate's discontent by emphasizing domestic issues.

The political kabuki that will ensue as the LDP seeks to regain public support while fending off opposition challenges will overshadow key foreign policy issues, such as nuclear negotiations with North Korea. A distracted Tokyo will be hampered in its ability to press for resolution of the abductee issue, which other Six-Party Talks nations see as an impediment to testing Pyongyang's commitment to giving up its nuclear weapons.

Japan's economy remains strong, and the country's markets are likely to suffer only short-term

fluctuations in response to the present political uncertainty. Investors will be concerned, however, that Japan's next leader may delay economic reform and resort to pump-priming economic policies to regain public favor, exacerbating Japan's national debt.

Conclusion. Abe's departure less than a year after assuming office—and the chance that his successor may fair no better—raises concern that Japan will return to the pattern of ineffectual prime ministers serving brief terms that prevailed through much of the 1990s. A revolving-door leadership would have serious consequences: political gridlock, delays in necessary but painful economic reforms, and marginalization in international relations. It would raise questions in Washington over Japan's role as an ally.

Securing renewal of the anti-terrorism legislation is America's most pressing priority in the current political turmoil. U.S. policymakers, however, should be careful about using the legislation as a measure of the countries' relationship. Context is important, and the political scene in Japan is changed. Because the opposition DPJ intends to use the legislation to induce a political confrontation with the LDP, Washington runs the risk of needlessly straining the broader relationship with Tokyo, potentially undermining its long-term objective of having Japan assume a larger security role in northeast Asia as a bulwark against the military threats of North Korea and China.

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