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Japan's Opposition Buoyed by Leader's Resignation

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In Japanese politics, darkness is one step ahead.

—Japanese proverb

The resignation of Ichiro Ozawa as leader of the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) increases the potential for a political overthrow of Japan's ruling party for only the second time in 50 years.

Ozawa had been on track to engineer a political upset and become prime minister until a close aide was arrested for campaign financing violations. Although Ozawa was not implicated in this scandal himself, his growing personal unpopularity threatened to undermine his party's chances in this year's parliamentary election. Growing numbers of DPJ legislators were discussing whether to jettison Ozawa in order to salvage any chance of winning the lower house and thus gaining the prime ministership.¹

The DPJ is a coalition of factions with conflicting views on security policies critical to the U.S. such as:

- The bilateral military alliance;
- Parameters for deployment of Japanese forces overseas; and
- Tokyo's approach toward North Korea.

The DPJ will see a struggle between conservative factions that favor maintaining a U.S.-alliance-centered foreign policy and those advocating Ozawa's more independent security stance. A DPJ victory in the lower house election could lead to calls for rewriting the agreement on realignment of U.S. forces in Japan. In the coming months, Japanese politics should garner particular attention from U.S.

policymakers who may soon face a new Japanese leadership—one that is willing to hinder U.S. security objectives and even challenge the status quo of the bilateral alliance.

LDP: Dead Party Walking. Prime Minister Taro Aso and his ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) have been wracked by political gaffes, scandals, and plummeting approval ratings. Although the LDP has had a monopolistic grasp on Japanese political power, ruling uninterrupted since 1955 except for a short period in 1993, it is increasingly vulnerable to losing the second house of parliament and thus the prime ministership.

In late 2008, surveys showed a shift in voter preference from Aso and the LDP to Ozawa and DPJ. A November 2008 survey by *Kyodo News* showed that the public preferred the DPJ over the LDP 43 percent to 36 percent. A December *Yomiuri Shimbun* survey indicated Ozawa surpassed Aso as the preferable candidate for the first time.² The DPJ seemed guaranteed of victory until the arrest of Takanori Okubo, a senior aide to Ozawa, for falsifying political contribution records.

Following the scandal, support for the LDP rebounded to 30 percent by April 2009, equaling

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the support for the DPJ, according to a *Kyodo News* survey. Moreover, 65 percent of respondents felt Ozawa should resign as DPJ leader.³ Aso's rebounding popularity was also due to a perception that the economic stimulus might work and strong patriotic sentiment in response to the most recent North Korean missile crisis. Ozawa's resignation will give the DPJ renewed momentum with voters, allowing it to extend its lead over the LDP. Victory, however, remains far from guaranteed.

The Japanese Public: A Pox on Both Your House. Despite the DPJ's lead over the LDP, both parties suffer low approval ratings—a reflection of voter apathy and cynicism. Although the Japanese public is increasingly willing to change horses, it is doing so without a great deal of enthusiasm. An *Asahi Shimbun* survey showed that 91 percent of respondents were either a little or greatly dissatisfied with the current Japanese political system, with 60 percent being greatly dissatisfied.⁴

It is a foregone conclusion that the LDP will lose its two-thirds majority control of the lower house. As such, even if it managed to win a simple majority and maintain control of the lower house, the party would still lose its ability to use parliamentary rules to overrule the opposition-controlled upper house. This scenario would cause even worse political stalemate and legislative gridlock in Japan.

If the DPJ wins a majority of the lower-house election, gaining a trifecta of both houses of parliament and prime minister, it would be a historical shift in Japanese politics. If the DPJ were to win a plurality but not an absolute majority, it could trigger defections across party lines or even a post-election realignment with splits within one or both parties.

How and when such a realignment would occur or along what fault lines it would divide are

unpredictable, since Japan would be entering into uncharted waters. A realignment could create either two major parties divided along ideological lines or many factionalized parties with transitory coalitions. Regardless, the resultant political turmoil would further constrain U.S. efforts to get Japan to assume a larger security and economic leadership role in Asia.

Future Japanese Policy in Flux. It is unclear what DPJ policies would be if the party gained control, since the party has no ideological homogeneity. The DPJ is driven by factions and has been struggling to achieve consensus on security policy. Some legislators favor the conservative views of former party leader Seiji Maehara, who advocates maintaining a strong alliance with the U.S.

Other DPJ leaders supported Ozawa's advocacy for constraining the deployment of Japanese defense forces overseas to only those missions approved by the U.N., a view at odds with U.S. efforts to get Japan to assume greater regional and global security responsibilities. Ozawa supporters would be more resistant to U.S. efforts to secure Japanese participation in counter-terrorism and nation rebuilding efforts in Afghanistan.

Ozawa has called for a hedging strategy of downplaying Tokyo's relationship with the U.S. and reaching out to Beijing. Conversely, DPJ conservatives are concerned that a rising China might not respect the wishes of smaller countries or follow international norms of behavior.

The U.S. has pressed for Japan to reinterpret its current theory of collective self-defense in order to allow for more expansive missions for the Japanese self-defense forces overseas. Conservative DPJ members agree with former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's efforts to adopt a looser interpretation that would allow Japan to protect U.S. forces if they were in

1. The DPJ gained control of the less powerful upper house of the bicameral Diet legislature in 2007. The Japanese administration must call an election of the lower house no later than September 2009. Whichever party gains a majority in the lower house chooses the prime minister.
2. Michael Green and Nicholas Szechenyi, "U.S.–Japan Relations: Traversing a Rough Patch," Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 2009, at http://www.csis.org/component/option,com_csis_pubs/task,view/id,5193/ (May 14, 2009).
3. *Kyodo News*, "Aso Cabinet Approval Rating Rises 5.9 points to 29.6%: *Kyodo* Poll," April 29, 2009.
4. *Observing Japan*, "The Japanese People Lose Hope," March 19, 2009, at <http://www.observingjapan.com/2009/03/japanese-people-lose-hope.html> (May 14, 2009).

danger while defending Japan. Such a view, however, would be anathema to the DPJ's more liberal factions.

After the election, it could take some time for the DPJ to achieve consensus. Such a post-election consensus could be dependent on who is selected as prime minister as well as the ministers of foreign affairs and defense. The DPJ may be constrained in implementing a drastic policy shift to the left by a potential rebellion of the younger conservative wing, which could seek to realign with their counterparts in the LDP.

Our Condolences, You Won. The election of the DPJ could create turbulence in the Japanese-U.S. security alliance and disrupt efforts to coordinate allied policy toward North Korea. Ozawa supporters are more likely to resist efforts to implement punitive measures for North Korea's violation of U.N. resolutions and failure to meet its denuclearization commitments.

Furthermore, the next prime minister, regardless of party, will face the same systemic constraints that have long prevented Japan from exerting a strong political and economic leadership role. The next leader will preside over a country that is not only floundering economically but has a political system seemingly designed for inefficiency and a populace apparently acquiescent to China filling the Asian leadership vacuum.

When asked to consider the Japanese political system as a ship at sea, 50 percent of respondents said that it is like a ship with a broken rudder, adrift in the ocean, while 31 percent said it is like a ship that has run aground and is sinking.⁵ In such a situation, changing captains on the Japanese ship of state will be insufficient to overcome Japan's deep-rooted structural weaknesses—flaws that hinder the strengthening of the U.S.-Japanese alliance.

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5. *Ibid.*