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Japanese Election Poses Challenges for U.S. Alliance

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Japan's opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) fulfilled predictions by winning a landslide victory over the moribund ruling party. The change in government is historic: It is only the second time in 50 years that the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has been out of power. A disgruntled and angry electorate threw the LDP out of office for not only failing to fix Japan's long-standing economic problems but seeming incapable of offering any hope for future improvement.

The degree of change that the DPJ victory will bring to Japan's foreign policy remains in doubt. DPJ security policy pronouncements were vague and contradictory as the party toned down its earlier positions in the run-up to the election. Japan's inherent political constraints, anemic defense funding, and societal apathy will continue to hinder any prime minister's ability to significantly alter course.

But it is clear that the DPJ will be less willing to fulfill existing bilateral U.S. force realignment agreements and more resistant to Washington's requests for Japan to expand its overseas security role. A poll of DPJ candidates taken on the eve of the election revealed that only a minority support U.S. security objectives such as dispatching Japanese forces to Afghanistan, continuing refueling operations in the Indian Ocean, and altering Japan's collective self-defense guidelines to allow for a more robust overseas defense role. More DPJ candidates favored shifting Japan's emphasis to Asia over placing a greater focus on the U.S.–Japanese alliance.¹

Electorate Eager for Change. The electorate's primary concern was curing Japan's economic woes.

The public was determined to drive out incumbents in favor of change, a case of “better the devil you don't know than the devil you do.” Advocacy for economic reform, prevalent in previous elections, was abandoned in favor of promises of new government programs to increase household income.

The DPJ tripled its previous number of legislative seats in the lower house. The depth of the LDP's defeat is shown by the ouster of half of the powerful faction heads and party stalwarts Finance Minister Kaoru Yosano, former Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu, former Chief Cabinet Secretary Nobutaka Machimura, and former Defense Minister Yuriko Koike.

Despite the groundswell of support for the opposition, an *Asahi Shimbun* survey noted that only 54 percent of respondents believed that the DPJ would actually bring economic and political improvement to Japan, reflecting low expectations for the new government.²

Japanese politics are now entering uncharted waters and tumultuous times lie ahead. The DPJ will be hard-pressed to secure immediate achievements to better position itself for the 2010 upper house elections. DPJ coalitions with other parties will strengthen or weaken depending on initial pol-

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icy choices. Veering to the political right will strain relations with its socialist partners, while adopting policies weakening the alliance with the U.S. could drive conservative members toward accommodation with counterparts in the LDP.

The DPJ's Clouded Strategic Vision. Although Tokyo's foreign and security policies loom large in Washington's view of Japan, these issues were unimportant for Japanese voters. The reality is that the DPJ does not yet know what its foreign policy will be due to the diverse ideological spectrum of its factions. The DPJ selection of its ministers of defense and foreign affairs will be an important initial signal of which faction's views are predominant. But it will take time for a comprehensive DPJ strategy to become evident.

The DPJ has long advocated a Japanese foreign policy more independent of Washington and based on a more equal relationship. But the party shied away from its more strident positions as its chances of winning the election grew. The DPJ's election policy manifesto was a consensus document designed to gain favor with the electorate and reassure the U.S.

Yet there is much in previous and current DPJ policy statements that should be of concern to Washington, since they advocate positions inimical to U.S. interests. For example, DPJ leader Yukio Hatoyama emphasizes that the U.S.–Japanese alliance would “continue to be the cornerstone of Japanese diplomatic policy” but describes Japan as “caught” between the U.S. and China. He promotes a more Asian-centric strategy for Japan that incorporates long-term economic and political integration of Asian countries. He calls for an Asian economic bloc using a common regional currency and a permanent framework for collective security similar to the European Union.³

On near-term security issues, Hatoyama declared that he would not renew the anti-terrorism refueling mission by Japanese maritime self-defense forces when the law expires in January.⁴ The DPJ vehemently opposed previous renewals of the legislation. The DPJ also opposes the relocation of the U.S. Marine Corps air station on Okinawa from Futenma to Nago—preferring that the air units depart the island entirely—and disagrees with the cost-sharing agreement for redeploying 8,000 U.S. Marines from Okinawa to Guam. Furthermore, the DPJ has called for a review of the existing Status of Forces Agreement.

A Bumpy Road Ahead for the Alliance. Washington will nervously watch for clues as the DPJ struggles to overcome internal divisions and achieve policy consensus. Uncertainty begets suspicion and misinterpretation, and the potential for diplomatic *faux pas* by the new U.S. and Japanese administrations is high.

The Obama Administration must balance achieving its security objectives with maintaining strong relations with critical ally Japan. At times, these goals will be in contradiction with each other, necessitating a delicate balance and deft management of the alliance by both nations.

To a greater degree than ever before, the U.S.'s ability to influence Japanese policy will be hindered by a ruling party that is skeptical—if not suspicious—of Washington's intentions. The way ahead will require subtle sophisticated interaction, even as both sides write the terms of a new relationship.

Washington should expect and accept a certain degree of change in tone from the new DPJ government. An overly heavy-handed U.S. approach could irritate or even alienate a critical partner. The U.S. should refrain from responding to every policy pronouncement by the DPJ members, par-

1. *The Mainichi Daily News*, “Survey Highlights Similarities in Policies between DPJ, Komeito Ahead of Election,” August 28, 2009, at <http://mainichi.jp/select/seiji/archive/news/2009/08/20/20090820ddm003010095000c.html> (August 31, 2009).
2. *Asahi Shimbun*, “DPJ Takes Power in Landslide Win,” August 29, 2009, at <http://www.asahi.com/politics/update/0826/TKY200908260489.html> (August 30, 2009).
3. Yukio Hatoyama, “A New Path for Japan,” *The New York Times*, August 27, 2009, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/27/opinion/27iht-edhatoyama.html> (August 30, 2009).
4. Kyodo News, “MSDF's Mission to Be Terminated If DPJ Wins Power: Hatoyama,” July 29, 2009, at <http://home.kyodo.co.jp/modules/fstStory/index.php?storyid=452002> (August 30, 2009).

ticularly those advocating dramatic security policy changes.

Additionally, Washington should quietly counsel the new leadership to moderate its campaign rhetoric lest it weaken perceptions of the importance of the alliance and the need to transform it to better address a rapidly changing threat environment. The DPJ party leader and future Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama should realize that governing is different from campaigning.

At the same time, however, the Obama Administration should call for the DPJ to affirm the existing alliance relationship and bilateral policies. The U.S. must press for a continuation of Japanese commitments, particularly to U.S. force realignment agreements, refueling operations in the Indian Ocean, and missile defense.

Status Quo? U.S. patience will be tested, however, by Japan's lingering reluctance to alter the comfortable status quo in which Tokyo emphasizes

economic solutions to security challenges and provides minimal military resources to defend its national interests overseas.

Washington can take some comfort from knowing that dire predictions of a dramatic leftward lurch in Japan are wrong. But even minor policy changes or alterations in tone will have far-reaching implications and strain the alliance.

Washington should also be concerned that perhaps the best it can hope for is maintaining the bilateral status quo. However, the current state of affairs is becoming increasingly inadequate to address either Asian or global security challenges. The Obama Administration should make it clear that a slow transformation of the alliance is incompatible with the rapid pace of global challenges.

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