

BACKGROUND

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U.S. Should Use Japanese Political Change to Advance the Alliance

Bruce Klingner

Abstract

Some time in the next year, the Japanese people will once again have an opportunity to reshape their nation's political landscape. To many, such reform seemed imminent three years ago, when the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) swept into power. Yet the DPJ was unable to turn campaign promises into concrete reforms, and as a result, the Japanese public's desire for political transformation remains unsatisfied. Polls indicate that the conservative LDP will gain a plurality and choose LDP President and former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe as Japan's next prime minister. Abe's conservative foreign policy views and the Japanese public's growing concern over China provide an excellent opportunity for Washington to achieve several policy objectives critical to the health of the U.S.-Japan alliance.

Three years ago, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) swept into power, riding a wave of public anger over the political stagnation created by 50 years of uninterrupted rule by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). The euphoria was fleeting, however. Fiscal realities forced the DPJ to abandon its unrealistic economic promises, and growing threats from China and North Korea promoted the party to reverse its naïve foreign policy. Plagued by amateurism and wracked with scandals, the DPJ proved to be as politically inept as the LDP and suffered a similarly rapid turnover of prime ministers. Indeed, within a year, the DPJ's first prime minister had resigned (the second prime minister lasted only 15 months), and voters turned on the party, returning control of the upper house to the previously discredited LDP.

As a result of its failed agenda, the DPJ will almost certainly lose the lower house and prime ministership during the next lower-house election. Though the exact date of the election remains uncertain, it must be held before the end of August 2013. Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda will avoid setting a date as long as possible, hoping to—somehow—resurrect his moribund party. In response to such delay, the LDP will threaten

KEY POINTS

- The 2009 elections may have changed Japan's political leadership, but the DPJ was unable to turn campaign promises into concrete reforms. Consequently, the Japanese public's desire for political transformation persists, and there is little public confidence in any political party.
- The next Japanese leader faces several daunting challenges: a stagnant economy, staggering public debt, deteriorating demographics, growing security threats from China and North Korea, and fading international influence.
- China's continued geopolitical aggression is fueling a rising nationalism throughout Japan, reshaping the Japanese political landscape and, potentially, the coming election.
- Polls indicate that the conservative LDP will gain a plurality and choose former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe as Japan's next prime minister.
- Abe's conservative foreign policy views and the Japanese public's growing concern over China provide an excellent opportunity for Washington to achieve several policy objectives critical to the health of the U.S.-Japan alliance.

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legislative stalemate to force an earlier election.

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Washington has long pressed Japan to assume a greater role in its own defense while adopting overseas security responsibilities commensurate with its military and economic strength. It would be beneficial for the United States if Japan were to increase its defense spending, enable collective self-defense, adopt less restrictive rules of engagement for forces involved in overseas peacekeeping operations, and press forward on building a replacement U.S. Marine Corps airbase on Okinawa.

Japanese Electorate Still Longing for Leadership

Although the 2009 elections may have changed Japan's political leadership, the DPJ was unable to turn campaign promises into concrete reforms. Consequently, the Japanese public's desire for political transformation persists, and there is little public confidence in any political party: The most popular candidate remains "none of the above." This disenchantment has created a political vacuum that Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto is seeking to exploit with his *Nippon Ishin no Kai* (Japan Restoration Party—JRP).

Democratic Party of Japan.

Like Wile E. Coyote standing in mid-air, blissfully unaware of his impending plummet, Prime Minister Noda is ruling over a party teetering on the brink of disaster. The DPJ will survive, but the party, like Wile E., will be hobbled with its master plan, which has proven to be a colossal failure.

By the time of Japan's confrontation with China over the Senkaku Islands in 2010, the DPJ had jettisoned the foreign and security policies on which it had campaigned. For instance, the party no longer criticized Japan's alliance with the United States, nor did it advocate embracing China, creating an East Asian Community without Washington, or moving the U.S. Marine Corps airbase at Futenma off of Okinawa. The DPJ, for all intents and purposes, had embraced the foreign policy of its LDP rival.

ASIDE FROM ITS CONTINUED LOSS OF PUBLIC SUPPORT, THE DPJ IS ALSO SUFFERING FROM DEFECTIONS IN ITS RANKS: OVER 70 LAWMAKERS HAVE FLED THE PARTY, CITING DIFFERENCES WITH NODA OVER RAISING THE CONSUMPTION TAX OR RESUMING OPERATIONS AT THE OI NUCLEAR POWER PLANT.

The DPJ's economic promises would meet a similar fate: During the 2009 campaign, for example, the DPJ pledged that it would increase pension and medical benefits for the elderly and avoid any tax increases for four years. Yet after winning

the election, the DPJ abandoned its benefits pledge, and by 2011, Prime Minister Noda was proposing to double the consumption tax from 5 percent to 10 percent. He also promised that all of the additional revenue would be devoted to stabilizing the troubled social security system and not to increasing the size of the government.¹

By pushing the unpopular tax, Noda dug the DPJ's political grave. As DPJ Diet Member Hiroshi Kawauchi stated, "the public's distrust of pensions and health care [under the LDP] and our proposals were what brought us to power [but now] the DPJ has turned into the LDP."² Aside from its continued loss of public support, the DPJ is also suffering from defections in its ranks: Over 70 lawmakers have fled the party, citing differences with Noda over raising the consumption tax or resuming operations at the Oi nuclear power plant.³

Noda: Surprisingly Bold and Effective. Noda's plummeting approval rating is ironic since he has proved to be an anomaly: a Japanese leader with the courage to actually lead. He has been far more effective than any of his five predecessors from either major party.

Noda's accomplishments are even more impressive considering that he assumed office shortly after the March 2011 disaster trifecta of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear catastrophe. Public fear of additional nuclear disasters led to the shuttering of all Japan's nuclear reactors, which had supplied 30 percent of the country's electricity.

Noda also proved to be far more politically adept than expected.

1. "Noda Aims for Decisive Political Action," NHK, January 24, 2012, http://www3.nhk.or.jp/daily/english/2012024_19.html (accessed October 23, 2012).
2. Jake Schlesinger and Toko Sekiguchi, "Japan Tax Debate May Undermine Deeper Reforms," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 18, 2012 (accessed October 23, 2012).
3. The Japanese public has become overwhelming anti-nuclear following the Fukushima nuclear disaster in March 2011.

In early 2012, for instance, the Japanese media predicted his imminent political demise, yet he was able to outmaneuver his political opponents and push through controversial legislation. Furthermore, despite fierce opposition from within his own party as well as an obstructionist opposition party, Noda won approval for the consumption tax increase. He also implemented Japan's long-promised relaxation of arms export principles and convinced Washington to alter a bilateral defense agreement by delinking required progress on construction of the Marine Corps' Futenma Replacement Facility prior to the United States returning five military bases on Okinawa.

Ozawa: The Unpopular Populist. One political name that is surprisingly absent from discussion of Japan's political future is former DPJ leader and kingmaker Ichiro Ozawa. Known as "the destroyer," Ozawa has a long history of abandoning parties or policies he once championed if doing so increased his electability. In fact, Ozawa's only consistent ideology has been to believe strongly in whatever is most popular with the voters at the moment.

But Ozawa's popularity, along with his ability to influence elections, is dwindling. Although he still boasts the support of 49 Diet members, many of these allies are first-term lightweights expected to lose their seats in the coming election. Consequently, Ozawa is now scrambling for money—and relevance. His newly formed People's Life First

Party may end up with only 10 seats after the next election.

Liberal Democratic Party. During last month's party elections, the LDP selected Shinzo Abe as its new president. Abe was a surprise victor since he had been third in the polls behind former Defense Minister Shigeru Ishiba and LDP Secretary-General Nobuteru Ishihara. Abe came in second in the first round of voting behind Ishiba, who was far more popular among local party officials and members. During the run-off election—in which only Diet members could vote—Abe won due to a combination of factional politics and personal chemistry

NODA'S PLUMMETING APPROVAL RATING IS IRONIC SINCE HE HAS PROVED TO BE AN ANOMALY: A JAPANESE LEADER WITH THE COURAGE TO ACTUALLY LEAD. HE HAS BEEN FAR MORE EFFECTIVE THAN ANY OF HIS FIVE PREDECESSORS FROM EITHER MAJOR PARTY.

Had the party chosen Ishiba as its president, the LDP might have bolstered its prospects in the forthcoming general election. Abe remains very unpopular with the public; voters remain angry about his abrupt and perceived irresponsible resignation as prime minister after only one year in office.⁴ Indeed, many blame Abe for the party's poor showing in both the 2007 upper-house and 2010 lower-house elections.

After his 2012 selection as party president, Abe pledged to stand up to China over the Senkakus, to strengthen the alliance with the United States, and to have Japan assume a larger security role. Abe's positions on these issues are attuned to a growing Japanese nationalism. However, some voters are concerned that Abe could go too far in pushing confrontation with China, which is Japan's largest trading partner.

Such fears are hardly irrational: During his tenure as prime minister, Abe strained relations with China and South Korea by denying that during World War II, Asian women were forced into sexual slavery by Japanese imperial forces and by pushing legislation that enabled school textbooks to downplay Japan's wartime actions. Yet Abe showed restraint by not going to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine⁵ as his predecessor, Junichiro Koizumi, had and by making his first official visit to China.

Following his victory in the September 2012 LDP elections, Abe sought to allay such concerns, remarking:

We must show our will to firmly protect our territorial waters and the Senkaku islands in the face of China's actions. That said, when I took office as prime minister six years ago, I visited China first because the Japan–China relationship is very important. Even if our national interests clash, we should acknowledge that we need each other and control the situation while thinking about things

4. "71% Seek Early Election as Promised: Mainichi Poll," *Mainichi Shimbun*, October 1, 2012, <http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20121001p2a00mOna016000c.html> (accessed October 23, 2012).

5. Yasukuni is a Shinto shrine that commemorates Japan's 2.5 million war dead, including 14 convicted Class A war criminals. Visits by Japanese political leaders to the shrine anger Japan's neighbors who were victims of the country's military aggression for which they believe Tokyo has not fully apologized or atoned.

strategically. My stance on this has not changed.⁶

Japan Reformation Party.

Driven by public rage against a stagnant and ineffective government, Mayor Horu Hashimoto's upstart party is rattling Japan's political system. The charismatic mayor is decisive and capable of implementing genuine change, albeit at the local level. Hashimoto's record is impressive: As mayor, he reduced deficit-burdened budgets and overcame labor union resistance to impose teacher performance requirements. Now, with his sights set on the national political stage, Hashimoto is promising a radical overhaul of Japan's political system.

In many respects, Hashimoto's initiative is akin to a one-man Tea Party. Like the U.S. Tea Party movement, Hashimoto is riding a wave of popular disenchantment, if not disgust, with the established political parties. But whereas the American Tea Party was driven by a bottom-up amalgamation of informal organizations, Hashimoto is offering a top-down plan that is gaining converts that are due, for the most part, to the personal appeal of one man. In fact, pundits have referred to Hashimoto as the "Japanese Ross Perot."

By disrupting the stagnant Japanese political system—a system

6. Gavin Blair, "Would Japanese Nationalist Abe's Return to Premiership Fuel Row with China?" *The Christian Science Monitor*, September 26, 2012, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2012/0926/Would-Japanese-nationalist-Abe-s-return-to-premiership-fuel-row-with-China> (accessed October 23, 2012).

7. Stephen Harner, "Osaka Mayor Hashimoto's 'Eight Measures for Restoration,'" *Forbes*, August 7, 2012, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/stephenharner/2012/08/07/osaka-mayor-hashimotos-eight-measures-for-restoration> (accessed October 24, 2012).

Hashimoto's Eight-Point Manifesto

1. Governing Institutions Reform.

- Change from a centralized power state model to a regionalized power state model.
- Direct, popular election of the Prime Minister.
- Eliminate half of Diet Lower House seats and abolish the Upper House.
- Make the national consumption tax a locally collected and distributed tax.

2. Financial and Administrative Reforms.

- Simplify and raise effectiveness of the parliamentary system and governmental institutions.
- Set targets for bringing the national fiscal balance into surplus.

3. Civil Service System Reform.

- Extend nationwide the civil service reforms implemented in Osaka (bonuses for performance; salary based on ability, actual performance, and position).
- Abolish guaranteed, lifetime employment in civil service.

4. Education System Reform.

- Nurture self-reliant individuals who can support a self-reliant nation and self-reliant localities.
- Allow localities to choose their education system.
- Institute a voucher system at all levels, including universities, to promote competition among institutions.

5. Reform of the Social Security System.

- Reform the system to change from funding providers to directly funding beneficiaries.
- Deregulate to increase competition among service providers.

6. Economic Policy, Employment Policy, Tax Policy.

- Join the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade pact; expand free trade agreements.
- Implement a "flat tax" reform.

7. Foreign Policy and Defense.

- Prepare to self-reliantly defend Japan's sovereignty and territory.
- Increase participation in international peace activities like U.N. peace-keeping operations.
- Arrest the decline in official development assistance; shift to an active foreign aid policy.

8. Amending the Japanese Constitution.

- Popular election of the Prime Minister.
- Put the question of revising Article 9 (renouncing the right to wage war) to a popular vote.⁷

in which parties do not provide ideological or policy differences—Hashimoto could be a welcome change, but how will Hashimoto be regarded once he is forced to articulate more detailed foreign and domestic policies? As one pundit opined, “he may be the popular new flavor of the month, but how will people react once they taste it?”⁸

A major test for Hashimoto will be how strong a roster of candidates he can field for the election. He cannot include too many established politicians defecting from the LDP or DPJ, lest he risk his “outsider” image, but he could be hard-pressed to find 300 viable “outsider” candidates, particularly as he is requiring all candidates to provide their own funding.

Hashimoto’s decentralization theme—shifting political power from Tokyo to the prefectures—though popular in Osaka, has not resonated with the rest of the country. Though there is little public support for either the DPJ or the LDP, few voters see problems being remedied by transferring governmental responsibilities to the countryside. Moreover, some of Hashimoto’s proposals— notably, changing the constitution—are seen as unrealistic.

Fading Enthusiasm. Some mid-year polls had the JRP surging ahead of both the LDP and the DPJ. Since the summer, however, polls have indicated that an increasing number of voters harbor doubts about the JRP’s near-term ability to become a major player on the national stage. Furthermore, there has been friction between Hashimoto and some of the Diet members who defected to the JRP. Kenta Matsunami, who left the LDP to join the JRP, advocated that Diet members should take the

lead in setting the party’s foreign and security policies, declaring that Hashimoto’s “dictatorship won’t be tolerated.” Hashimoto fired back that he retained sole control over the party’s platform.⁹

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Several of Hashimoto’s recent diplomatic positions have drawn public criticism. Such disapproval, however, is hardly surprising, as several proposals are out of step with popular Japanese sentiment. For example, Hashimoto advocated taking joint control, along with South Korea, of the disputed Dokdo/Takeshima Islands; Japan currently claims sole sovereignty over this territory. Hashimoto’s view regarding the Senkaku Islands is equally unpopular: The mayor has argued that the Japanese-controlled Senkaku Islands should be declared a territorial dispute with China and taken to the International Court of Justice for resolution

As a result of both intra-party friction and Hashimoto’s controversial positions, the party’s initial momentum and popularity first slowed and is now declining slightly. Most recent surveys put the JRP roughly even with the DPJ; however, both parties trail significantly behind the LDP. Similarly, election predictions have fallen dramatically: Initial estimates predicted that the JRP would win 100–130 Diet seats, numbers that

were subsequently revised downward, first to 70–100 seats and most recently to only 40–70 seats.

A Political Tsunami from Osaka...or Beijing?

Although the JRP could have a major impact on Japan’s lower-house election, Chinese assertiveness is likely to be an even greater factor. Specifically, high bilateral Japanese–Chinese tensions could benefit the Liberal Democratic Party, as the electorate regards the LDP, and Abe in particular, as more likely to stand up to Beijing. Therefore, Noda will attempt to delay calling the general election as long as possible, in part to calm Japan’s confrontations with China and South Korea.

The Senkakus dispute has also hurt Hashimoto, as it took media attention away from his campaign and highlighted his lack of foreign policy experience. A growing Japanese nationalism puts Hashimoto at a disadvantage since he cannot “out-Abe Abe.” Nor does Hashimoto appear to be interested in drawing in elder statesmen as advisers to define a more detailed foreign policy.

Rising Nationalism. China’s continued geopolitical aggression is fueling a rising nationalism throughout Japan, reshaping the Japanese political landscape and, potentially, the coming election. It is important to note, however, that this shift is occurring almost exclusively with regard to China; it does not signal a broader return of Japanese militarism. Indeed, China’s bellicose actions have snapped Japan out of its usual complacency and triggered a greater willingness among voters to abandon the nation’s post-war

8. Author interview with Japanese journalist, September 25, 2012.

extreme pacifism. This shift is also the product of generational change, as the wartime generation that knew first-hand the ravages of war and first rejected militarism is passing away.

Consequently, Tokyo is now more willing to confront Chinese expansionism and strengthen its military. Beijing's assertiveness and perceived arrogance during the 2010 Senkaku incident led Japan to adopt a new defense strategy. Polls show that 70 percent–80 percent of Japanese now have a negative view of China. Since assuming power, the DPJ has adopted more conservative foreign and security policies, and all major parties now support a strong alliance with the United States.

SINCE ASSUMING POWER, THE DPJ HAS ADOPTED MORE CONSERVATIVE FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICIES, AND ALL MAJOR PARTIES NOW SUPPORT A STRONG ALLIANCE WITH THE UNITED STATES.

As part of its nationalistic awakening, public concerns about Japan's military vulnerability are increasing, and the voters now favor a strong leader willing to push back against China. Polls show that 25 percent of respondents support increasing Japan's military strength, up from 14 percent in 2009 and 8 percent in 1991.¹⁰ The populace may also be more amenable to long-overdue changes such as increasing defense spending, and adopting a less constrictive interpretation of collective self-defense and military rules of engagement.

Those changes, however, would merely enable Japan to defend its allies if they were attacked; despite breathless warnings from regional media, such reforms would not constitute a green light for resurgent militarism. The public's shift to the Right, though unprecedented by Japanese standards, is less significant and dangerous than widely perceived. Though "nationalism" conjures up negative images of Imperial Japan, the country is simply adopting more of the standard nationalism of other countries—and certainly a far less aggressive strain than was exhibited by China during recent widespread violent anti-Japanese protests.

Fringe elements aside, no domestic party is advocating for the creation of a militaristic Japan that severs its ties with the United States. Abe will instead seek modest changes in the rules governing Japan's security policy while remaining committed to the alliance with the United States. Abe favors standing up to China, but he also understands the importance of maintaining good relations with Beijing.

Furthermore, it is important to decouple Abe's prior political history from any discussion of Japanese nationalism. Abe's revisionist historical statements on Japan's wartime actions are indeed troubling and would needlessly exacerbate regional tensions—if he acts on them or restates them as prime minister. If Japan is to become a more effective leader in the Asia-Pacific, some political crockery needs to be broken, but Abe should refrain from acting like a bull in the geopolitical china shop.

During his term as prime minister, however, Abe did largely refrain from provocative actions, and the United States would do well to counsel him privately not to expend his political capital on needlessly rewriting history.

Likely Election Results. The ruling DPJ is poised to lose big in the next election—a defeat that will knock the party out of power. The LDP, discredited in 2009, will become the largest of Japan's political parties. The LDP's dramatic reversal of electoral fortune is due less to anything positive the party has accomplished during its time in opposition than it is to what the DPJ has failed to do during its time in office.

Though the LDP will have a plurality, it will not win enough seats to secure a majority, thereby forcing it to scramble for coalition partners. Consequently, minor parties could secure disproportionate influence on policymaking—a scenario similar to the one that unfolded during Hatoyama's stewardship, where the Social Democratic Party was able to wield considerable influence over the DPJ. The LDP will certainly retain its partnership with the Komeito Party. One major question, however, remains unclear: Will the LDP join with the DPJ—either disaffected defectors or a slimmed-down centrist party that jettisoned its leftist elements—or with Hashimoto's JRP?

Earlier this year, an LDP–JRP coalition had seemed assured because Abe had highlighted his special relationship with Hashimoto. In July, Hashimoto said, "If Mr. Abe is elected party president, [the

9. Yuka Hayashi, "The Bursting of the Hashimoto Bubble?" *The Wall Street Journal*, October 4, 2012, <http://blogs.wsj.com/japanrealtime/2012/10/04/the-bursting-of-the-hashimoto-bubble/> (accessed October 23, 2012).

10. Chico Harlan, "With China's Rise, Japan Makes a Shift to the Right," *The Washington Post*, September 21, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/with-chinas-rise-japan-shifts-to-the-right/2012/09/20/2d5db3fe-ffe9-11e1-b257-e1c2b3548a4a_story.html (accessed October 24, 2012).

JRP] would join a coalition with the Abe LDP.”¹¹ But in late September, Hashimoto told reporters that due to policy disagreements with the LDP, “when elections come, we will do battle with [Abe and the LDP.]”¹² Whether he was signaling no potential future alliance with the LDP or simply raising the price for an eventual coalition remains another mystery.

If Hashimoto joined a coalition with the LDP, he would have to do so in a way that does not compromise his image as an outsider advocating reform. The LDP and JRP have policy differences: The LDP favors nuclear power and the consumption tax, while JRP opposes both. Therefore, the final composition of the coalition will depend on the number of legislative seats that each party wins.

Potentially Improved Policy Implementation. The next Japanese leader faces several daunting challenges: a stagnant economy, staggering public debt, deteriorating demographics, growing security threats from China and North Korea, and fading international influence.

If the LDP wins the general election as expected, it could have authority in both houses of parliament, eliminating the “twisted Diet” of the past several years where control was split between the LDP and DPJ. This scenario improves the potential for the new prime minister to implement policies without being hindered by political gamesmanship. The degree of success, however, depends on Abe’s choosing capable people (and not a “cabinet of cronies” as he did during his first term) and defining a clear policy vision.

Once in office, Abe would not alter the direction of Japanese policies, since the DPJ already reversed its original plans and adopted LDP policies. Rather than a *change* in policy, the new leadership could bring about an *acceleration* in policy—an important distinction.

What Washington Should Do

The United States should reinforce Japan’s new national security pragmatism by:

- **Making clear** that Japan cannot continue to rely solely on others to defend its overseas interests. Tokyo should accept greater international security responsibilities commensurate with its status as a major nation. Japan could, for example, enhance efforts to defend sea lines of communication.
- **Urging** Tokyo to increase defense spending to fully meet national and allied security requirements.
- **Recommending** that Japan implement a less restrictive interpretation of the theory of collective self-defense to enable it to defend allies in times of crisis. Japan should also adopt more realistic rules of engagement to enable overseas Japanese security deployments to make effective contributions rather than draining allied resources.
- **Pressing** Tokyo to make tangible progress toward building the Futenma Replacement Facility on Okinawa. The next leader should

go beyond mere words of support and instead begin to fulfill Tokyo’s commitments.

- **Encouraging** greater South Korean–Japanese military and diplomatic cooperation. For example, implementing the bilateral GSOMIA intelligence-sharing agreement would enhance allied deterrence and defense capabilities against common threats.
- **Increasing** trilateral U.S.–South Korea–Japan military cooperation. The three countries should explore the potential for joint peacekeeping missions, counterterrorism, counterproliferation, counternarcotics, anti-submarine warfare, minesweeping, cyberspace protection, and humanitarian assistance and disaster response operations.
- **Retaining** robust forward-deployed U.S. military forces in the Western Pacific. These forces should be closely integrated with their South Korean and Japanese counterparts. This not only provides for common allied defense; it would also quell any South Korean fears of unconstrained resurgent Japanese militarism.
- **Expressing** unambiguous support for U.S. allies in the Pacific. Washington should not only continue to affirm the inviolability of our bilateral defense treaties, but also de-emphasize efforts to reassure China and instead make clear to Beijing that the United States is taking steps at the request of

11. Takao Toshiyama, “LDP Fight Over Next Ally,” *The Oriental Economist*, September 2012, p. 4 (subscription on file with author).

12. Eric Johnston, “Hashimoto Now Wary of Abe Alliance,” *The Japan Times*, September 28, 2012, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20120928a7.html> (accessed October 24, 2012).

Asian nations that are worried by greater Chinese attempts at intimidation.

- **Privately counseling** Abe not to push his revisionist history agenda. Retracting previous Japanese government statements on Japanese wartime actions, as Abe has recommended, would needlessly inflame long-simmering regional animosity. Instead, Japan should revise its statements of atonement and apology in ways that will satisfy Korean sensitivities and end efforts by the PRC to exploit regional resentments for geostrategic gain.

Conclusion

Ironically, China and North Korea have inadvertently altered

the geostrategic landscape to their disadvantage: By allowing the façade of a “peaceful rising” to slip and by rejecting President Barack Obama’s extended open hand of dialogue, Beijing and Pyongyang, respectively, have soured the Japanese public on the DPJ’s naïve foreign policies. As a result, both the Japanese government and the Japanese people perceive a greater national vulnerability to these regional threats.

The first step in addressing this vulnerability seems already to be underway in the form of renewed appreciation for the U.S.–Japan alliance. The next step would be a greater willingness by Japan to assume greater responsibility for its own defense as well as addressing international security concerns. The United States should encourage

this new trend, as it is consistent with America’s own national security objectives.

Whether the next prime minister can weather the storms facing Japan is a question of critical importance to America’s interests in the Asia–Pacific. In recent years, Japan has been hamstrung by a series of weak leaders. Japan’s next leader must take charge and institute bold reforms, lest the land of the rising sun fade into the sunset.

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