



Japan's Drift and its Implications for the US-Japan Alliance by Yuki Tatsumi

Yuki Tatsumi is [ytatsumi@stimson.org] a Senior Associate at the Henry L. Stimson Center in Washington DC.

In the House of Councillors (Upper House) election on July 11, the ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) suffered a defeat. Missing the goal set by Prime Minister Kan Naoto, the DPJ gained only 44 seats. The party's inability to gain a single-party majority in the Upper House means that political instability in Tokyo will continue at least until the next House of Representatives (Lower House) election, which is unlikely to be held until the summer of 2013. US alliance managers must be prepared to deal with a partner that is unable to make difficult decisions for the foreseeable future.

Less than two weeks after the ballot, Kan and his government are already hamstrung by the election result. Kan's ratings continue to slip: polls taken by *Nihon Hoso Kyokai* (NHK) between July 17-20 show his public approval rating is 39 percent. Opinion polls by *Yomiuri Shimbun* and *Kyodo News* following the July 11 election show similar results. Criticism of the DPJ leadership continues to mount within the party, creating a divide within the DPJ.

The DPJ defeat is bad news for Japan. First and foremost, it means that Kan's ability to lead will be weakened. In his June 11 policy speech to the Diet, Kan vowed to press forward on a wide range of reform that his predecessor began. He also proposed that his government will work to achieve (1) a strong economy, (2) strong national finances, and (3) reliable social security. He even reached out to the opposition to begin discussions across party lines on how to balance Japan's deficit-heavy national finances, including raising the consumption tax. But the DPJ's weak election performance means it will be extremely difficult for Kan to pursue this agenda. In the last four years, Japan has seen four weak prime ministers, each serving barely a year. Another politically weakened prime minister is the last thing Japan needs.

The poor election result also puts Kan in a weak position within his party. Kan is serving out Hatoyama Yukio's term as DPJ president. To solidify his influence within the party, Kan will have to be re-elected president in the September DPJ election. The election outcome has weakened Kan's position going into the election, encouraging Ozawa Ichiro, the most powerful politician in the DPJ who was forced to resign with Hatoyama in June, and his followers to challenge Kan in the September ballot. This is not the political environment in which Kan can take on an ambitious policy agenda for Japan.

The DPJ's defeat should concern the United States. After nine months of confusion under Hatoyama, Washington had hoped that Kan could create a stable government and the two countries could proceed with implementation of bilateral

commitments, most notably the relocation of the Marine Corps Air Station in Futenma, Okinawa. In fact, under the agreement that was reached in May 2010, the two governments are expected to determine the exact location and construction method of the Futenma replacement facility.

However, the political atmosphere in Okinawa — dominated by a feeling that the island was betrayed by the Hatoyama government's failed promise to relocate Futenma Air Station out of Okinawa — has hardened against accepting a relocation facility within Okinawa. In the November Okinawa gubernatorial election, the anti-US base candidate is anticipated to win. It will require considerable political will and prowess by the leadership in Tokyo to implement the May 2010 agreement. But Kan will have no political capital to spend.

For Washington, this means that Futenma could again dominate the bilateral discussion with Tokyo. It keeps the two governments from discussing a broader range of common security concerns, and it hinders efforts to create a joint document to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the US-Japan alliance in preparation for President Obama's trip to Japan in November.

Since Koizumi Junichiro relinquished the prime minister's office in September 2006, the US-Japan alliance has drifted. The nine months of Hatoyama's government aggravated this situation by putting questions in the minds of those in Washington about whether Japan is prepared to remain a key US ally in East Asia. The sense of relief and hope triggered by Kan's rise to power has evaporated in the post-election political atmosphere in Tokyo. Nobody is sure when the drift will end and how. While the world needs a economically and politically strong Japan to work with the United States to address a wide range of global challenges, the Upper House elections and their implications are bad news for Japan, the US, and the entire international community.