



Koizumi's gamble and its impact on the U.S.-Japan alliance by Yuki Tatsumi

As many predicted, Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro dissolved Japan's House of Representatives after the House of Councillors defeated the postal reform bill by 17 votes. A general election is now scheduled for Sept. 11. While it is risky to predict the outcome of the vote, the dissolution of the Lower House has profound implications for Japanese politics and for the U.S.-Japan alliance.

The rejection of the postal bill indicates that the traditional consensus-based decision-making mechanism within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has almost completely broken down. Although criticized as opaque and driven by parochial factional – rather than national – interests, this unofficial coordination mechanism allowed factions to broker deals behind the scenes. As unseemly as this process was, it worked. While Koizumi appeared to take the initiative on a range of issues, he in fact relied a great deal on such coordination processes within the LDP to work out details. Without them, no one knows how the LDP or the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) will be able to move policy initiatives forward at the political level.

Immediate impact on U.S.-Japan alliance

These coordination mechanisms have been critical to Japan's efforts to be a reliable U.S. ally in recent years. Senior LDP Diet members played an essential role in unifying LDP decision-making and bridging differences with opposition parties on defense and security policies. For instance, the contingency legislation was able to pass the Diet largely thanks to LDP former Defense Minister Kyuma Fumio, who was the point man in the ruling coalition to move the bills forward. Japan's decision to introduce ballistic missile defense also became politically possible because of similar below-the-radar coordination between the LDP and other major parties. These behind-the-scene political efforts allowed Japan to dispatch Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to support U.S.-led coalition operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

With that mechanism weakened, pushing initiatives critical to the U.S.-Japan alliance will be harder. Negotiations over U.S. force realignments, including implementation of the Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO) process, is the first issue that will be affected. JDA Director General Ohno Yoshinori indicated that the interim report on the negotiations, originally expected next month, will likely be delayed at least until October. The process can be further delayed, or even derailed, depending on the Sept. 11 election outcome. This will frustrate the Pentagon, which wanted to reach agreement by June this year. With so many bases and facilities under consideration for realignment, Japan needs a strong coordination effort at the political level to wrap up the bilateral agreements – it is simply impossible for government

bureaucrats to work out deals with different localities, prefectural governments, and other interested groups without robust political backing. With a much-weakened political coordination mechanism, the negotiations risk significant delay, which could be a major irritant in the alliance.

Or take the Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF) deployment to Iraq. The U.S. hopes that Japan will extend the deployment another year after the current authorization expires in December 2005. This will set off a fierce political battle: the DPJ has already said it will bring the troops home if it wins a majority in September. Since Washington expressed its support for China's position on the debate over United Nations Security Council reform, a number of politicians, both inside and outside the LDP, have questioned Japan's need to maintain JSDF deployments to support the U.S.-led coalition. Again, without a political force that can unify the ruling coalition and reach out to the opposition, it will be extremely difficult for Japan to extend the deployment.

Lack of a political coordination mechanism will also complicate efforts to pass a "permanent law" – legislation that would provide a consistent set of standards for Japan to use to decide whether it can (and should) deploy the JSDF overseas. Constitutional revision will be put on the back burner as well.

Washington's patience tested

Between now and Sept. 11, there will be as much political jockeying as in 1993, when the LDP lost its majority to a seven-party coalition led by Hosokawa Morihiro. Even after the election, it will take a while for the political turmoil to end. Japan will be distracted by internal affairs for some time.

Some argue the election's impact on Japan's foreign policy, including U.S.-Japan relations, will be minimal, regardless of the outcome. The difference, they assert, is merely one of emphasis: will future Japanese political leaders remain as committed to the alliance with the U.S. or will they sometimes veer away from the alliance?

Many in the U.S. will welcome the turmoil as necessary for Japan to become a nation with a more timely decision-making process and greater transparency. This is necessary for Japan to revitalize its political structure.

Many foreign policy issues, including those important for the long-term health of the U.S.-Japan alliance, will be shelved during this period, however. The urgency and salience of these issues can turn a lack of progress into sources of major tension between the allies. Alliance managers in Washington must be patient in the months to come.

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