



Wanted: More Clarity from Ozawa on the U.S.-Japan Alliance By Weston S. Konishi

Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) President Ozawa Ichiro's success in orchestrating the downfall of Prime Minister Abe Shinzo is a major victory for his party. It is also arguably the first time since the resignation of Abe's grandfather, Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke in 1960, that a prime minister has lost his job over an issue directly related to the U.S.-Japan alliance – perhaps the take-home impression of policymakers in Washington.

But, greater power and influence come hand in hand with greater responsibility. As long as Ozawa continues to consolidate power and alter government policies, he must be clearer about where exactly he stands on security relations with the United States, lest he send the wrong signals about Japan's commitment to the bilateral alliance.

After the DPJ's defeat of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in the July 29 Upper House elections, Ozawa announced plans to oppose passage of the anti-terror law, which provides the legal basis for Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) refueling operations for U.S.-led coalition vessels in the Indian Ocean. Ozawa's opposition to the law was widely seen as a political strategy to trip the Abe Cabinet and force a political crisis leading to a general election – a strategy that has so far proved successful.

Ozawa's opposition to the anti-terror law elicited a swift response from the U.S. Soon after the Upper House election, U.S. Ambassador to Japan Thomas Schieffer made his first visit to DPJ headquarters in order to convince Ozawa not to oppose the anti-terror bill. Ozawa flatly refused this request, in what was described by some Japanese papers as a bold rejection of U.S. pressure. (Subsequent reports suggest that the U.S. decided not to press the issue out of concern that it may further undermine the LDP's position.)

Although there has been some speculation in the U.S. that Ozawa's actions are "anti-alliance," other observers remember his staunch support for the alliance in the early 1990s, when he was a key LDP powerbroker.

The question is whether Ozawa's opposition to the anti-terror bill is a political tactic or a more fundamental shift away from his previous support for the U.S.-Japan alliance? And where, by extension, does the DPJ – which includes critics and supporters of the alliance – stand as a whole regarding elements of the U.S.-Japan security relationship?

Statements by Ozawa, as well the official DPJ policy platform, shed little light on these questions. The DPJ is generally supportive of the U.S.-Japan alliance, but calls for Japan to have greater "autonomy" in the decision-making process. The DPJ's basic security policy statement elliptically

argues that: "The stance that Japan should take from now on is to engage in close dialogue and consultation with the United States, giving full consideration to Japan's national interests." (Since when did Tokyo stop considering national interests when engaging the U.S.?)

Now that the DPJ is no longer just a noisy opposition party, it needs to move beyond iconoclastic critiques of the alliance and start filling in the details of its position on security cooperation with the United States.

To be fair, the DPJ is clear on some issues. The party considers the U.S. invasion of Iraq illegitimate and wants to end any ongoing SDF role in the region – a move that would be another blow to President Bush's coalition in the Middle East.

But there are a number of alliance management issues with which the DPJ has registered general dissatisfaction. These include the amount of host-nation support of U.S. bases in Japan, the implementation of U.S. force realignment plans in Okinawa and elsewhere, and legal provisions of the bilateral Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA).

The question is whether the DPJ intends to tweak these measures or just block them at some point.

It may well be that the U.S.-Japan alliance can absorb the death of the anti-terror bill as we know it. But a withdrawal of SDF missions in the Middle East, followed by a breakdown of momentum across a string of alliance management items, would call into question the depth and sustainability of bilateral defense commitments.

Moreover, if there are circles within the DPJ that believe a Democratic Party victory in the 2008 U.S. presidential elections might bring an administration more sympathetic to such changes, they are sorely mistaken. No responsible Democratic administration would accept revisions to the alliance that might be unfavorable to U.S. strategic interests.

In the coming months, Ozawa needs to bring heads together within his party and articulate – not just to Washington but also to the Japanese people – what exactly they have in store for the alliance as the DPJ continues to influence defense policy. The stakes are high, and it would be a shame if the DPJ were to inherit a Japan with more security autonomy than it bargained for.

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