

## **New Politics in Japan and Its Global Security Roles**

by Yoichiro Sato

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Prime Minister Aso Taro, whose public support has plummeted below 20 percent, has announced dissolution of the Lower House of the Diet. The opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) has been gaining ground and could win majority control of the Lower House in the election that will be held at the end of the month. The prospect of regime change in Tokyo has triggered discussions about its implications for U.S.-Japan relations and Japan's global security roles. While the fall of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leads some observers to expect drastic change in Japan's foreign and security policy orientations, various factors minimize the likelihood of a fundamental shift in Japanese policy, assuring a considerable degree of continuity. To be fair, not all continuities are good from the U.S. point of view. At the same time, however, a U.S. policy based on inflated expectations (or pessimism) from a DPJ-led Japan is likely to invite a backlash from Japan. Properly assessing continuity and change in Japan's foreign and security policy is essential.

### **Systemic Constraints**

As a junior partner in the U.S.-Japan alliance, Japan's security role has been defined within the alliance framework from its inception. The end of the Cold War did not end the alliance; rather the alliance evolved to move beyond Japan's territorial defense into enhancing Japan's roles in regional and global security. Japan explored alternative frameworks for renewed security roles in the United Nations (UN) and via regional multilateral institutionalization (such as the ASEAN Regional Forum), but the primacy of the U.S.-Japan alliance not only remained unchanged but was elevated. Japan's distant military dispatches, like those to the Indian Ocean, Iraq, and the Sea of Aden, were primarily viewed as contributions to the bilateral alliance, rather than to the UN-based security framework, as an unambiguous UN mandate has not been available.

As an opposition party, the DPJ has opposed (and on one occasion succeeded in blocking) legislation on dispatch laws. However, as the election nears, the DPJ's stance on these security contributions has softened and moved closer to that of the LDP. So, when addressing Japanese refueling of coalition ships in the Indian Ocean, the DPJ manifesto dropped the party line of "immediately withdrawing" Japanese vessels, and party leaders have assured continuation of the operation until the law expires. On the anti-piracy legislation, LDP-DPJ disagreements revolved around a more symbolic issue of

which agency (Coast Guard or Maritime Self-Defense Forces) should lead, rather than on participation per se in the multilateral operation off the Somali coast. Reading Washington's mood will likely continue to be a major driver of Japan's security policy, regardless of which party is in power.

### **Domestic Constraints**

The DPJ's rise has in large part been attributed to a revolt of dissatisfied urban voters against the LDP, which was rural-based and entrenched in a web of interest group politics. A more open political process and leadership selection, advocated by the DPJ, have brought about expectations for a more dynamic foreign and security policy. Former Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichiro captured these public demands and utilized them for his own advantage in an intra-LDP power struggle; the last two LDP prime ministers (Fukuda Yasuo and Aso Taro) failed to ride this wave of populism. The DPJ is better positioned to not only capture urban "floating" non-affiliated voters, but also cut into the traditional rural support bases of the LDP (farmers and small shop owners) by criticizing Koizumi-era market oriented reforms.

Two factors have led observers to expect a "liberal shift" of DPJ policy away from the LDP. First, the DPJ included many former Socialists at its founding. Second, in opposing LDP legislation to enable SDF dispatches overseas, the DPJ has emphasized "civilian" contributions to international peace. Given the strong residue of post-World War II pacifism in Japan, a populist DPJ leadership might be more reluctant to send Japanese troops overseas.

However, this tendency needs to be carefully assessed. The DPJ has gradually transformed itself from an incoherent party of defectors from every other party to a more coherent "center-left" party, aided by the retirement of some politicians at extreme ends of the spectrum, centralization of the candidate selection process, and introduction of a party manifesto that binds party members. As far as military dispatch is concerned, the party is much less constrained by the prospect of a leftist veto of every pragmatic security policy – which characterized the DPJ in its early days. As long as the DPJ achieves a majority on its own, rather than in coalition with Socialists, DPJ security policy will not be held hostage by leftists.

On the other hand, the DPJ emphasis on "civilian contributions" would likely face internal resistance in the party. This DPJ counter-proposal to the contribution to the international coalition through maritime refueling in the Indian Ocean was built around a DPJ leader's (Ichiro Ozawa) long-held idea of nonmilitary contributions, but the proposal never became party policy because it was never detailed; blame internal opposition within the DPJ. The murder of Japanese diplomats in Iraq remains fresh in Japanese memory, and

Japanese voters would be less tolerant of civilian dispatches to post-conflict zones than military dispatches to the least risky areas (like oceans), which characterize the present LDP policy. In practical terms, the Obama administration's expectations for a DPJ-led government contributions to peace-building in Afghanistan and Pakistan need to be carefully checked against reality or disappointment may hurt bilateral relations.

### **Conclusion**

The mood in favor of a DPJ-led "change" has some observers of Japan concluding that major change in Japan's security policy is forthcoming. Optimists foresee expansion of civilian-based activism in coordination with U.S.-led global peace-building efforts. Pessimists foresee termination of Japanese military contributions to such U.S. efforts. Both expectations are likely to be unfulfilled. Japan under the DPJ will likely follow the pragmatism of the LDP, which paid attention to alliance management through symbolic, minimalist, and risk-averse contributions to global peace-building efforts.