

Gloomy Outlook for Japan-China Relations after the DPJ Ballot by Mihoko Matsubara

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Japanese Prime Minister Kan Naoto has resigned. The ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) will hold a presidential election Aug. 29 to replace him; the winner will become the next prime minister of Japan. The new prime minister will face many challenges; among his foreign policy priorities is getting the Japan-China relationship back on track. Relations have been tense since a Chinese fishing boat collided with Japanese Coast Guard boats near the disputed Senkaku Islands in September of last year. That sore continues to fester as Chinese boats continue to enter disputed waters.

The DPJ presidential field is crowded with six candidates: Trade Minister Kaieda Banri, Agriculture Minister Kano Michihiko, former Transport Minister Mabuchi Sumio, former Foreign Minister Maehara Seiji, and Finance Minister Noda Yoshihiko.

The leading candidates are Maehara, Kaieda, and Noda. A *TV Asahi* poll taken a week ago showed Maehara leading the pack with 39.7 percent of respondents naming him the most desirable candidate; Kaieda was second (10.1 percent), and Noda came in third (7.2 percent).

Two factors cloud Maehara's prospects. The first is a political scandal, which worries some DPJ members. Maehara resigned as foreign minister in March after admitting that he had received illegal donations from a non-Japanese citizen who is a Korean resident.

The second factor is the failure to win the support of Ozawa Ichiro, the former DPJ president and king maker. Ozawa has a powerful influence on the party vote as head of a political faction of 120 Diet members. As of Friday, Ozawa had not identified the candidate he would back. Ozawa is expected to wait until the last minute before making a commitment. There are said to be tensions between Ozawa and Maehara, and there is little chance that he will back the former foreign minister.

Although the next administration is regarded as a place holder until next year's general election, China has a stake in the outcome. Bilateral relations between Japan and China have been under considerable strain for a year, and threaten to deteriorate further still. The fishing boat incident aggravated anti-Chinese sentiment in Japan and anti-Japanese feelings in China. According to the 7th annual Japan-China opinion poll conducted by *China Daily* and Genron NPO (a Japanese think-tank), the number of Chinese with a negative image of Japan increased from 55.9 percent in 2010 to 65.9 percent this year,

while the number of Japanese people with a negative view of China grew from 72.0 percent to 78.3 percent.

For China, Kaieda is the preferred candidate. He is known as a pro-China expert who has visited the country more than 100 times. (He was named after the Great Wall.) In an interview with *Searchina*, he said he does not regard China's growing military power as a threat, and emphasizes long-term economic cooperation. He expects China to become liberal, rich, and stable.

The two other candidates are more hawkish toward China, and likely to heighten territorial disputes and reignite the Yasukuni Shrine controversy. The latter is especially sensitive, and a visit would inflame anti-Japanese sentiment in China. Beijing will use these two issues to pressure Japan in return.

Maehara is the least favorable candidate for China. He is considered a hardliner toward China, and backs the China threat theory. A Chinese newspaper, the *Guangdong News*, editorialized this week that his election would be destabilizing, blaming his "big mouth": Maehara calls for amendment of the Constitution to permit the right of collective self-defense and for strengthening the Japan-US alliance. He was foreign minister when Japan arrested the Chinese fishing boat captain last September and China blamed him for "masterminding" the affair to provoke a crisis.

Noda's views on Yasukuni Shrine would also irritate the relationship. In 2005, he said that visiting the shrine as prime minister shouldn't be a problem since the San Francisco Peace Treaty and four Diet resolutions restored the honor of all war criminals. On Aug. 15 of this year, Noda confirmed that his stance had not changed, although he refrained from saying whether he would visit the shrine if he was prime minister and he didn't visit Yasukuni this year. If he becomes prime minister, the Yasukuni issue is likely to again become a central issue in the bilateral relationship.

Noda has not clarified his policy agenda, and this would allow the mass media to focus on Yasukuni. Even if Noda doesn't visit the shrine, he is unlikely to alter his comment on "war criminals." Beijing would use it as leverage to accuse Japan of glorifying war and not reflecting on the past.

A Maehara or Noda victory will complicate the Japan-China relationship. Even Kaieda cannot avoid controversy over the territorial issue. Heading into an election year and facing its own domestic issues, Beijing will likely use the territorial dispute and the Yasukuni issue to unite the country via nationalism and pressure Japan. Japanese politicians have not learned political lessons from the controversy over the recent years. Unless new leadership in both nations decides to end the vicious circle, they will not be able to create a fundamental solution for this bilateral relationship, one of the cornerstones of Asia's future.