

## **Japan's DPJ: The Party of Change**

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When the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) came to power in 2009, alliance watchers focused on two of its security-related promises: ending Japan's refueling mission in the Indian Ocean that supported US and NATO forces operating in Afghanistan and renegotiating an agreement to relocate US troops within Okinawa. The promises were a giant step backward in what was interpreted as years of gradual expansion in Japan's roles and missions and a push to deepen US-Japan relations. Despite these promises, a review of its tenure shows that the DPJ has actually initiated changes that better align Japan to meet current security realities.

Consider first Japan's strategic partnerships. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) inaugurated the first non-US security relationship with Australia in 2007. Yet, it was the DPJ that signed an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement and began negotiations on an information-sharing agreement. Similarly, while the LDP forged closer ties with India, the DPJ continues to deepen this relationship, including the initiation of bilateral naval exercises. Importantly, the DPJ has also been expanding burgeoning security relationships with Vietnam and the Philippines. Although the DPJ never opposed new security relationships, it did prioritize peaceful relations with China. Yet, its track record shows it has been forging and deepening relations with countries that share a strategic suspicion of China.

The DPJ's suspicion was most evident in its changes to Japan's defense strategy. In December 2010, Tokyo adopted a new National Defense Program Guidelines. It was notable in that, acknowledging the increasing security challenges posed by China and North Korea, the DPJ changed Japan's defense posture from "basic defense" to that of "dynamic defense." The shift enables the SDF to respond quickly and effectively. In practice, this means shifting the focus from ground assets in Hokkaido (aimed at countering Cold War threats from Russia) to maritime assets in Japan's southwestern-most islands (aimed at countering current threats from China). Additionally, it means creating more mobile forces that can move quickly to defend remote islands under threat from China.

The DPJ has also made changes in its view of SDF missions. The party used to show considerable hesitance to dispatch the SDF overseas. Yet, despite cancelling the Maritime SDF's (MSDF) refueling mission in the Indian

Ocean, the DPJ maintained an MSDF anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden. It even began studying the possibility of sending MSDF refueling ships as support and, in 2010, opened Japan's first permanent overseas base in Djibouti to support the MSDF's operations. More unexpected has been recent discussions regarding a possible Middle East conflict. With over 80 percent of Japan's crude oil transiting the Strait of Hormuz, the Noda government has begun studying how the SDF can participate prior, during, and after a conflict if Iran blocks the Strait. Ironically, one of the options under consideration is a rear-area support/refueling mission for US and allied forces, similar to the Indian Ocean refueling mission the DPJ ended. Although no decision has been made, including the legal basis or the weapons' use standard, the fact that the DPJ initiated this discussion is significant given its past reluctance to support SDF missions.

The DPJ has also made legal changes that increase Japan's ability to contribute to security challenges. The most notable is the December 2011 relaxation of the 1967 arms export ban. The DPJ had long opposed LDP calls to relax it. For example, it voiced skepticism about Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's decision to make an exception to include joint development of missile defense-related weapons and technology with the US. Yet, not only has the DPJ continued joint development, it approved the transfer by the US to third parties of SM-3 Block IIA missiles. With Noda's decision to relax the ban, Japan can now participate in international joint development and production of military equipment and technology with other countries and export defense-related equipment to support peace-building or humanitarian objectives. The relaxation is already bearing fruit as Japan will manufacture the US F-35 and jointly develop weapons with Britain.

A second legal change is Japan's claim to uninhabited islands. Even after a Chinese fishing trawler rammed into two Japanese Coast Guard (JCG) vessels in September 2010, Chinese vessels continue to patrol the region and have been calling upon JCG vessels to halt activities within Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Facing an increased Chinese maritime presence, DPJ-led governments have named 10 uninhabited islands in Japanese territorial waters in May 2011 and another 39 in March 2012, including the Senkaku Islands. Furthermore, Tokyo registered 23 remote islands as state property to serve as the base points for demarcating Japan's EEZ, thereby clarifying Japanese sovereignty over the islands. For a party that used to prioritize stable relations with Beijing, its actions outraged Beijing, which responded with names for 71 islands, including the Senkakus.

A third legal area is the law outlining SDF weapons' use standards when engaged in UN peacekeeping operations (PKO). Although Noda's predecessor did not act upon the recommendations of a government council examining Japan's participation in PKOs that called for easing the standards,

Noda reinitiated the discussion. The Noda government is considering a review of the International Peace Cooperation Law that would expand the range of situations in which the SDF could use their weapons. This would include the protection of civilians working for international and nongovernmental organizations engaged in PKO work outside SDF bases as well as defense of a camp jointly used by another country. However, the condition would be only on occasions of clear use against non-state or para-state organizations, such as terrorist groups.

The DPJ is also changing the institutional framework for handling security challenges. Two changes are particularly relevant. The first is an initiative to revive previous LDP efforts to create a National Security Council (NSC). The NSC, which would serve as an advisory panel to the prime minister, would become a command tower for Japan's strategies for security and foreign policies and unify existing security, crisis management, and information functions in the Prime Minister's Office. While the NSC would be limited to making recommendations, it would have a permanent secretariat and the authority to coordinate strategies between central government ministries and agencies. The result would empower the prime minister to set strategies based on in-house expertise.

A second initiative is an attempt to defend Japan's cyber-networks through creation of a cyber space defense force (CSDF). It is envisioned that the CSDF will initially be responsible for Ministry of Defense and SDF computer networks but most likely expand its scope since defense secrets may be leaked from other sources. Importantly, the CSDF would be responsible for not only defense, but also counter-attacks. To be legal, the government needs to have legislation that recognizes an external cyber-attack as an "armed attack" in order to allow the CSDF to invoke the right to self-defense. The details are yet to be released, but they are expected by the end of summer when the government has to submit FY2013 budget requests.

Although the DPJ suffers from internal divisions, these divisions may actually enable the DPJ to be the party of change, at least in the security realm. The DPJ, formed by former Socialists and LDP members, has struggled with its political identity. When in opposition, it largely agreed on what it opposed. As the governing party, agreement is more difficult. Yet, an increasingly aggressive China and the continuing North Korea threat has brought former Socialists closer to a conservative stance, thereby galvanizing the thinking of the party toward more realistic security policies.

Say what you will about the DPJ. Its first prime minister was a disaster. It did not handle the March 2011 crises well. Its campaign manifesto was littered with contradictions. The list goes on. Yet, in the security realm, the DPJ has initiated more change than anyone imagined possible and better aligns Japan to meet current realities. In the very least, the DPJ deserves credit for this.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.*