

# EAST ASIA INSIGHTS

## TOWARD COMMUNITY BUILDING

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## Japan under the DPJ

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Despite widespread predictions of a Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) defeat, the result of the August 30 general election in Japan was nevertheless stunning. Not only is the LDP no longer the dominant party in the Diet for the first time since the party's establishment in 1955, its seat total in the Lower House plunged from 300 (out of a total of 480) before the election to 119 after. In stark contrast, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ)—the perennial opposition party in the Lower House—raised its presence there by a remarkable 191 seats, for a total of 308. Together with its plurality (109 of 242 seats) in the Upper House, this means that the DPJ now controls 417 (or roughly 58 percent) of 722 seats in the Diet. This paved the way for DPJ President Yukio Hatoyama to be voted in as prime minister on September 16. Such a dramatic change in the makeup of the government after five decades of essentially single-party rule will undoubtedly have important implications for Japan's domestic politics and foreign policy.

### **What is the significance of the DPJ victory for Japan's domestic politics?**

It is important to note that—generally speaking—the LDP's poor showing in last month's election

was primarily due to widespread voter dissatisfaction with LDP rule. In other words, the election result does not necessarily indicate strong voter support for the DPJ's policy platform or confidence in its ability to govern. Since popular former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi stepped down in 2006, Japanese voters have become disillusioned with a series of ineffectual LDP prime ministers. Shinzo Abe and Yasuo Fukuda both resigned their posts less than a year after taking office, while outgoing Prime Minister Taro Aso is not considered by many to be a solid leader. In addition to an absence of strong leadership within the party, the LDP government was also seen as beholden to vested interests and excessively dependent on the bureaucracy to formulate government policy.

Whatever the reasons for the LDP's fall from favor, the fact remains that the DPJ is now in charge. In the coming weeks and months, the DPJ will move to consolidate leadership around Prime Minister Hatoyama. It remains to be seen how the DPJ will quell rumors about a possible dual power structure between Hatoyama and former DPJ President Ichiro Ozawa, who is now the party's secretary-general.

One of the DPJ's chief priorities will be to reform the policymaking process so that it is controlled by politicians rather than the bureaucracy. As part of this effort, the DPJ has pledged to establish a Bureau of National Strategy (*kokka senryaku kyoku*) directly under the prime minister. This bureau, which is expected to be staffed with politicians, bureaucrats, and public intellectuals, will be tasked with devising basic policy outlines, determining the priority of budget allocations, coordinating macroeconomic policies, and formulating a comprehensive foreign policy strategy and vision. There is no question that the DPJ's objectives in this regard are ambitious; indeed, a considerable amount of uncertainty remains as to whether the DPJ will succeed in its effort to reform the traditional bureaucrat-centered policymaking process.

**What sort of political realignment can be expected? What will the resulting distribution of power in the Diet mean for Japan's foreign policy?**

The fact that the DPJ still lacks a simple majority in the Upper House is significant. It will rule in coalition with its two small allies—the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the People's New Party. When it comes to foreign policy and national security issues, the policy differences between the DPJ and its allies—particularly the SDP—are substantial, arguably much greater than those between the DPJ and the LDP. The SDP, a scion of the defunct Japan Socialist Party—Japan's main opposition party from 1955 through the early 1990s—is a staunch defender of Japan's pacifist constitution. Not only will it be very reticent to give a green light to security cooperation with the United States, it may even oppose any overseas dispatch of the Self-Defense Forces (SDF). In short, despite its small size (the SDP only holds seven seats in the Lower House and five seats in the Upper House), the SDP will undoubtedly “punch above its weight class” in intra-coalition deliberations and thus serve as a significant constraint on the DPJ's foreign policy agenda. This situation is unlikely to change until the 2010 election in the Upper House at the earliest.

**What is the significance of DPJ President Hatoyama's opinion piece published last month?**

It is important to note, first and foremost, that this article, a partial translation of which appeared in the *New York Times* on August 26, 2009, was published in the run-up to Japan's most heated general election in a generation. The piece originally appeared in a Japanese-language journal and was not intended to be published for an overseas audience. Nevertheless, his critique of US “market fundamentalism” and financial policy, together with a clearly expressed interest in deepening Japan's ties with its Asian neighbors, undoubtedly gave rise to a great deal of concern overseas, particularly in Washington.

Hatoyama's main objective was probably to draw a sharp contrast between DPJ policies and those of the LDP, and he chose the most effective way to do so, vehemently criticizing the LDP's management of Japan's economy and foreign affairs. He probably wanted to impress upon the reader that the world is changing and the traditional LDP policy line is obsolete. Specifically, his remarks about “market fundamentalism” were a response to widespread public concerns with social ills, in particular the widening gap between rich and poor. With regard to foreign affairs, Hatoyama also stressed in the paper that excessive dependence on the United States is an inappropriate path for Japan given the increasingly multipolar nature of the international system.

Although the negative reaction in Washington to Hatoyama's piece is perhaps understandable, concerns are largely overblown. One should understand that the DPJ has been the opposition party throughout its existence and has plenty of experience criticizing the government but no experience actually running it. Furthermore, it is not just Japan whose policies are changing; it is important to point out that US policies are also evolving and the Obama administration's economic and foreign policies can hardly be characterized as “market fundamentalist” or “unilateralist.” Generally speaking, the policy platforms of the DPJ and the Obama administration have much about them that is complementary.

The telephone conversation between Obama and Hatoyama on September 3, 2009, in which Hatoyama reaffirmed the crucial importance of the alliance to Japan, will hopefully help ease such concerns. Indeed, it was an important step toward reassuring the United States of the DPJ's intentions. The two sides should continue to hold regular dialogue to prevent such public misunderstandings from occurring again in the future.

### **How will the DPJ's rise to power affect the US-Japan relationship?**

In a meeting with its likely coalition partners earlier this month, DPJ leaders cited an "equal US-Japan alliance" as the top priority on the national security agenda. Similar phrasing, namely "more equal-footed relations with the United States," also appears in the DPJ manifesto. Such a statement is not particularly surprising; after all, opposition political parties in many countries allied with the United States often criticize the ruling party for being excessively accommodating to Washington. However, several key items on the DPJ's foreign policy agenda suggest that Japan's policy toward the United States may be in for a substantive, though not necessarily negative, change.

First, the DPJ has called for a renegotiation of the Status of Forces Agreement and a review of programs related to the relocation of US forces (e.g. Futenma Air Base).<sup>\*</sup> Second, the DPJ has said that it will review the Maritime SDF's refueling activities in the Indian Ocean, which are widely seen overseas as a major contribution on the part of Japan to the fight against terrorism. Third, it has repeatedly stressed the importance of maintaining the "three non-nuclear principles"—i.e., not to manufacture, possess, or allow the introduction onto Japanese soil of nuclear weapons—while at the same time recognizing the need for the US nuclear umbrella, in particular to deter a possible nuclear attack from North Korea.

It is abundantly clear that the DPJ government will seek to reexamine the US-Japan security relationship in light of the changing security environment in the region. However, this is not necessarily a threat to US interests or the greater US-Japan

relationship. Rather, it presents a great opportunity. In the context of a rapidly changing security environment in East Asia and with the 50th anniversary of the US-Japan Security Treaty coming in 2010, it seems reasonable for the new governments in Washington and Tokyo to sit down together before the end of next year and conduct an in-depth review of how the US-Japan alliance has evolved over the past decade and jointly explore ways to strengthen and expand it in the future.

### **What will Japan's policy toward East Asia look like under DPJ leadership?**

Over the past several years, the DPJ has consistently championed closer relations with Japan's East Asian neighbors. Not only is the DPJ manifesto quite positive about the future prospects for an East Asia community, DPJ leaders are also arguably more sensitive about issues of history than their LDP colleagues. For example, Hatoyama has already pledged not to visit the controversial Yasukuni Shrine. Under DPJ leadership, Japan should be expected to engage in more proactive diplomacy toward the region, particularly as it concerns regional cooperation and its relations with China and Korea. On the issue of North Korea, the DPJ appears to adopt a pragmatic stance, calling for international unity and serious and comprehensive negotiations with Pyongyang as necessary measures to rid North Korea of its nuclear capabilities and achieve a breakthrough in negotiations over the abductees issue.

### **What effect will the DPJ's election victory have on Japan's global role?**

Indicators suggest that under DPJ leadership Japan will more actively engage the international community, particularly with regard to Japan's contributions to the fight against global climate change and to UN-centered security operations (including peacekeeping operations). This is manifest in the recent statement by Hatoyama calling on Japan to reduce greenhouse gases to 25 percent below their 1990 levels. This exceeds the Aso administration's less ambitious target of an 8 percent reduction—a number that was already opposed by many industries as too high. Much like the Obama administration, the DPJ government also is expected to

<sup>\*</sup> On August 31, the US Department of State stated that renegotiation of the bases agreement was off the table.

pursue a much more internationalist global posture than its predecessor.

**Broadly speaking, what are the long-term implications of last month's election result for Japan's foreign policy?**

It will be some time before the DPJ government will be able to establish its proposed Bureau of National Strategy and consolidate its leadership and policy direction. However, there is no question that Japan stands at a foreign policy crossroads. The international system—in particular East Asia—is

in the midst of a rapid transformation. Regardless of which party is in power, Japan must adapt its diplomatic strategy to meet the challenges of this new era. The historic change that has occurred in Japanese politics presents a prime opportunity for Japan to reinvigorate its foreign policy, strengthen ties with both the United States and its East Asian neighbors, and embark on a new course.

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## *East Asia Insights*

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