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The Democratic Party of Japan and North Korea Policy

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When President Obama met Prime Minister Hatoyama of Japan in November 2009, a variety of contentious bilateral issues were on the table. However, despite divergence between the two countries on the military base issues in Okinawa and disagreement over Japan's emphasis on building an East Asian Community, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government will stay closely aligned with the United States in terms of its basic North Korea policy.

Yoichiro Sato, former professor at the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in Honolulu, explains that “While a softening of the Japanese stance (on North Korea) is unlikely, Japan is also unlikely to take stronger actions than it has previously, such as using the Self Defense Forces (SDF) to counter North Korean actions.”

During the previous administration, the DPJ voted in favor of most bills on North Korea submitted by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and it has little incentive to make waves by altering its stance on North Korea now. Japan's relations with key members of the six-party talks were already on a rebound under the LDP government, and China and South Korea have improved their understanding and support of Japan's unique stance. Furthermore, North Korea has not softened its position toward Japan since the second visit by Prime Minister Koizumi in 2003, providing no incentive for Japan to reciprocate. While a softening of the Japanese stance is unlikely, Japan is also unlikely to take stronger actions than it has previously, such as using the Self Defense Forces (SDF) to counter North Korean actions.

The DPJ did not win the lower-house election of August 2009 based on foreign policy differences from the LDP. Voters were overwhelmingly concerned about domestic economic issues, including the recession and unemployment, devastation of the rural economies since Koizumi-era privatizations and the reduction of national subsidies to local municipalities, and lost pension records. The DPJ only differed from the LDP on specific foreign policy issues such as revision of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with the United States and relocation of the Futenma Airfield, but the DPJ even blurred these differences just before the election. The DPJ has inherited the LDP strategy of strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance and leveraging it in Japan's Asia policy.

Despite the DPJ emphasis on Japan's relations with Asia, Asian relations were already good under the LDP and this trend is likely to continue under the DPJ. Prime Ministers Fukuda and Aso stopped exploring new frontiers of military cooperation with the United States. They also refrained from their two predecessors' (Koizumi and Abe) tactics of employing nationalist agendas to unilaterally release Japanese diplomacy from the “burden of history”—the memory of Japan's war time aggressions. The idea of the East Asian Community did not originate with Prime Minister Hatoyama, as Koizumi had already proposed it in



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“Assuming that North Korea pursues de-escalation through return to negotiations, the DPJ is likely to hold the current policy toward North Korea. However, a serious escalation of tension, such as confirmation of a successful full-scale nuclear explosion, miniaturization of North Korean bombs, or a leadership crisis, is likely to cause a split in the governing coalition.”

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2002. The change of government leadership in Korea to Lee Myung-bak in 2008 brought back the “future-oriented” ROK-Japan relationship, which President Roh Moo-hyun initially implemented with Koizumi.

Trilateral coordination among the United States, Japan, and Korea on North Korean issues has recovered from its low during the tenure of U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill. China, with a good relationship with both the United States and Japan, has been taking its chairing role seriously in the six-party talks and is getting more frustrated by North Korean defiance. North Korea is currently seeking bilateral talks with the United States and ignoring Japan, but the United States is assuring Japan that no reward will be made to North Korea just for returning to the six-party talks. Hence Japan sees no need to unilaterally soften its approach toward North Korea right now.

The DPJ has voted in favor of most LDP-sponsored resolutions and bills to denounce and punish North Korea, including a ban on the entry of North Korean vessels into Japanese ports and the tightening of regulations on financial transfers to North Korea. One major exception will likely be the issue of ship inspections. Since the North Korean nuclear explosion test in 2009 and the resulting UN Security Council resolution 1874 to allow inspections on the high seas of ships in and out of North Korea suspected of carrying WMD-related cargos, the LDP has been attempting to create legislation to allow inspections of North Korean vessels by the SDF and the Coast Guard. The LDP bill was not brought to the final vote in the last session of the parliament before the election as the DPJ refused to cooperate on the legislative calendar. As the LDP is planning to resubmit its bill, the DPJ is currently split between countering the LDP bill with a softer version that allows only the Coast Guard to conduct inspections or simply rejecting the LDP bill altogether. DPJ reluctance to use the SDF in situations short of direct attack on Japan has been fairly consistent, despite the presence of several proponents within the party. The current DPJ lack of majority in the upper house and the presence of the Socialist Party in the ruling coalition will keep the DPJ from seeking more active security roles for the SDF.

Assuming that North Korea pursues de-escalation through return to negotiations, the DPJ is likely to hold the current policy toward North Korea. However, a serious escalation of tension, such as confirmation of a successful full-scale nuclear explosion, miniaturization of North Korean bombs, or a leadership crisis, is likely to cause a split in the governing coalition. Conservative members of the DPJ will likely defy the party leadership and support the use of the SDF in UN-sanctioned maritime inspections either by invoking the Regional Contingency Law or through new legislation. Though such a chance is slim, the centrist leadership of the DPJ would be better off with a contingency grand coalition plan with the LDP than with a dogmatic veto by the Socialists of any SDF role.

DPJ policy toward North Korea is likely to be based on the LDP hard line, supported by bi-partisan domestic consensus, favorable relations with China and South Korea, and the absence of ice-breaking initiatives from North Korea. However, serious doubt remains in the DPJ ability to handle an escalation of the crisis on the Korean Peninsula due to the party’s reluctance to use the SDF.