



BULLETIN

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Parliamentary Election in Japan and Its Impact on Foreign Policy

by Justyna Szczudlik-Tatar

Despite announcements of a greater independence from the U.S. and closer relations with Asian partners, the victory won by the opposition in Japan's parliamentary election is unlikely to produce any major changes in the country's foreign policy. The United States will remain its strategic partner in view of the security fears provoked by threats from North Korea and big-power ambitions of China, but close relations with the U.S. will most probably go hand in hand with a more active policy towards Asia; in particular, tighter relations should be expected with South Korea and China.

Election Results and Cabinet Formation. A fresh election to the lower chamber of Japanese Parliament, the House of Representatives, held on 30 August with a high voter turnout (69.3%), brought a landslide victory to the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), which defeated the conservative Liberal Democrats (LDP), a party that had ruled Japan almost uninterruptedly from 1995, either single-handedly or in coalitions.

The scale of the DPJ's triumph reflects voter dissatisfaction with the coalition rule of the LDP and the New Komeito Party (NKP), seen as inept in coping with the most dire recession in decades and the highest unemployment level since the 1950s (5.7% in July). The outcome was also influenced by LDP infighting, fast rotation in the post of prime minister (held by as many as four PMs since the previous election in 2005), and the unpopularity of the latest head of government, Taro Aso. A harbinger of things to come was the DPJ's victory in the 2007 election to the House of Councillors (upper chamber of Parliament) and last July's election to Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly. The final allocation of seats among the major parties in the 480-seat House of Representatives is now as follows: DPJ 308; LDP 119; NKP 21; Japanese Communist Party 9, Social Democratic Party (SDP) 7.

At a special session on 16 September, Parliament appointed DPJ leader Yukio Hatoyama the country's new prime minister, following an earlier coalition agreement (9 September) reached by the DPJ with the SDP and a holder of three seats, the People's New Party (PNP). Despite the runaway victory, the DPJ had to seek a coalition cabinet so as to be able to cooperate with the upper house, where it does not have an absolute majority. And the party needs government stability to keep its high support until the House of Councillors election in July 2010 (the upper house's term, which cannot be cut short, is six years, with half of the chamber replaced every three years). The durability of the coalition, though, has been doubted by some observers, citing the differences in the three parties' manifestos.

Relations with the U.S. The United States is the most important ally for Japan, following the 1960 treaty on mutual cooperation and security, which sanctions the stationing of U.S. troops in the country. U.S. security guarantees come as a consequence of Article 9 of the U.S.-forced constitution, providing for the renunciation of war and abolishment of the army. But Japan does have its Self-Defence Forces (SDF), a de facto equivalent of the army. The close Japanese-American relations were further strengthened by agreements of 1996 and 1997, extending the alliance to cover the so-called surrounding areas. The parties pledged mutual assistance in defence operations in those areas, which may translate into Japan's support for the U.S., by making available to that country its airports and sea ports, and by using the SDF. The notion of the surrounding areas was not specified,

but the timing of the accords (following the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1995–1996) indirectly points to Taiwan.

Under the LDP rule Japan maintained very close relations with the U.S., relations which the opposition attacked as servility, citing the U.S.-influenced passage by the Japanese Parliament in 1992 of a law allowing the SDF's participation in foreign missions and direct support of U.S. operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. When on the campaign trail, Hatoyama called for Japan's greater independence from the U.S., and he also spoke of a revision of the agreements on U.S. troops' stationing and the need to end the Japanese mission in the Indian Ocean, which provides logistic support for the United States operations in Afghanistan.

The announcement of policy modification in relations with the U.S. came in response to calls for a more independent foreign policy raised in Japanese public debate. Not without importance was the position of the Obama administration, which, while stressing the importance of the U.S.-Japanese alliance, also encouraged Japan to be more active in shaping global security. Speaking to this effect was U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton prior to her February visit to Japan, and President Obama himself, during a post-election telephone conversation with Hatoyama. But it should be remembered that Japan is seriously concerned about the situation in North Korea and China's big-power ambitions. Hatoyama's declaration, therefore, should be interpreted as part of the electoral campaign, aimed to set him apart from the then-governing coalition, and also as a signal sent to Asian countries to emphasize a relative increase in their weight for Japan, as against the United States. Possible changes in U.S.-aimed rhetoric will not be accompanied by any violation of the essence of ally relations, which have been largely determined by the previously mentioned Article 9 of the Japanese constitution.

A testimony to this direction in Japan's foreign policy may be seen in a first dispute that took place between the coalition partners. The SDP accused the DPJ of reneging on earlier pronouncements about U.S. military bases and the Indian Ocean mission—on the eve of a Hatoyama-Obama meeting, slated for late September (the Japanese prime minister will attend the G20 summit in Pittsburgh and the UN General Assembly session). Finally, a coalition agreement was reached, stating that the U.S. will be presented with proposals for change in arrangements related to the military bases, although it is very likely that the DPJ will slow down the implementation of the agreement until next year's election to the House of Councillors.

Relations with China and South Korea. Despite good economic contacts, these relations are not without distrust, caused by historical reminiscences and the policies pursued by the Junichiro Koizumi government in Japan in 2001–2006. Failure to resolve the questions of history textbooks (whitewashing Japan's role during World War II) and of the so-called comfort women (a euphemistic term for sexual abuse of Chinese and Korean women by the Japanese army), and Prime Minister Koizumi's visits to Yasukuni (a Shinto shrine commemorating servicemen and civilians who died for the emperor, including Japanese war criminals convicted in the Tokyo trial), have had a damaging effect on mutual relations. To this should be added unresolved disputes—with China, over Senkaku islands in the East China Sea; and with Korea, over Takeshima islands in the Sea of Japan.

After 2006, Koizumi's successors, Shinzo Abe, Yasuo Fukuda and Taro Aso, sought to improve relations with the two countries, as reflected in mutual visits and the fact that Japanese prime ministers stopped visiting Yasukuni. Of considerable importance was a tripartite summit held in Japan in December 2008 to discuss cooperation at a time of economic and financial crisis (the first such meeting outside the ASEAN + 3 formula). The parties agreed to increase stimulus spending, with Japan and China consenting to open foreign-exchange credit lines for worst-hit South Korea. More meetings are planned to be held under this formula, starting with a get-together in Tianjin, China, scheduled for 8 October.

Hatoyama's announcement of giving up visits to Yasukuni, his expressed will to deepen cooperation related to free-trade agreements, and proposals for a common Asian currency or regional integration are gestures made towards China and South Korea. Seeking improvement in relations with these countries will provide an important element of the foreign policy of the new government. This will be met with a positive approach towards Japan taken by both countries after the August election.

The foreign policy of the new Japanese government will thus be the resultant of the will to keep closer allied relations with the U.S., necessary for security considerations, and the desire to have ever closer relations with South Korea and China, especially in the economic field.