



# BULLETIN

No. 88 (164) • June 8, 2010 • © PISM

## COMMENTARY

Editors: Jacek Foks (Editor-in-Chief), Łukasz Adamski, Beata Górka-Winter, Leszek Jesień,  
Łukasz Kulesa, Marek Madej, Beata Wojna, Ernest Wyciszkievicz

### Change of Prime Minister in Japan

by Justyna Szczudlik-Tatar

*The resignation of Prime Minister Hatoyama and the appointment of Naoto Kan to replace him will not result in any significant changes in Japan's foreign policy. No changes are expected in Japan's relations with its Asian partners or with the European countries, although a change of tone in Japan's relations with the United States is likely.*

Prime Minister Hatoyama handed his resignation on 2 June 2010. The main reasons behind his decision were connected with financial scandals involving the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and his failure to keep a campaign promise to transfer the Futenma U.S. military base to a location outside Okinawa. Towards the end of May, after several months of negotiations with the U.S., the prime minister announced that the American base would remain in Okinawa, but would be transferred to the less-populated northern part of the island in keeping with agreements signed in 2006 and 2009. This decision led to a drop of support for Hatoyama and to the withdrawal from the coalition government of the Social-Democratic Party of Japan (SDP), which was against the decision. The change of prime minister is an attempt by the DPJ to rebuild public support prior to the elections to the upper chamber of parliament that are to take place in July. Japan is also striving to improve its relations with the U.S. that have been strained by the lengthy negotiations about the base and by Hatoyama's vague electoral declarations of greater Japanese independence from the U.S.

On 4 June, the DPJ chose Naoto Kan, the deputy prime minister and minister of finance in Hatoyama's government, to lead the party. He was appointed prime minister on the same day. The new government was formed on 8 June. Kan declared that his principal aims would be to rebuild public confidence and pursue economic reforms. In foreign policy, he pointed out that the alliance with the United States remained the cornerstone of Japan's diplomacy and promised an improvement in bilateral relations, although he did not state clearly what his stance was on U.S. bases in Okinawa.

Kan's nomination was well received in China. The new prime minister's past statements were recalled, when he had spoken against Taiwan's independence, admitted that Japan had been guilty of aggression against China during the World War II and criticized the visits by former Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi to the Yasukuni shrine, seen as a symbol of Japanese nationalism. China's Prime Minister Wen Jiabao congratulated Kan on his nomination, while the Chinese Foreign Ministry expressed hope that the new Japanese prime minister would continue the policy of close relations with China. U.S. President Barack Obama also congratulated Kan. Both sides promised closer cooperation—a fact that may indicate that the new Japanese prime minister will strive to carry out the provisions of the agreements on the U.S. military bases in Okinawa.

In foreign policy, the new government intends to strengthen relations with Asian countries and in particular to implement the decisions taken during the third China-Japan-South Korea summit held at the end of May 2010. The summit led to the adoption of a document which set out a vision for cooperation until 2020 and which provided for the institutionalization of trilateral meetings (a permanent secretariat serving these meetings will be established in South Korea in 2011), the signing of a free-trade agreement, the establishment of institutionalized dialogue in defense matters and the strengthening the Chiang Mai mechanism (mutual exchange of funds during periods of crisis).

It is probable that the tone of Japan's relations with America will change. In contrast to Hatoyama, Prime Minister Kan does not talk of Japan's greater independence from the U.S. Both countries stress the necessity to cooperate in the face of threats posed by North Korea and Iran. Consequently, a change of course about the Futenma military base should not be expected, and Japan's policy with regard to European countries will not change either.

Despite polls favorable to the DPJ following Kan's nomination, the decisions taken by the former prime minister—decisions that resulted in a drop of public support for his party—might contribute to its defeat in the elections to the upper chamber of Japan's parliament. The defeat would not mean a fall of the Kan government, but it would make effective government more difficult.