POLICY ANALYSIS ASPI

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Japan: Recasting politics, and opening up strategic 'space'

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8 December 2009

The Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), elected to the government benches in a landslide at the end of August 2009, is celebrating its first 100 days in office, and observers are starting to get a clearer picture of the new forces in Japanese politics. Unlike most Western democracies, where changes of government occur relatively regularly, Japan has essentially been ruled by the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) for over fifty years, with only one minor interruption in the 1990s. Indeed, the triumph of the DPJ represents the crumbling of the single-dominant-party political system that has characterised post-war Japan—and that's a long-awaited and important event.

The first 100 days haven't been a totally smooth ride. The relationship with Washington has become tense. In the staid world of US–Japan alliance politics, Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama came into office on a reformist platform. During the election campaign, he promised to pull Japan's refuelling ships out of the coalition effort in Afghanistan, to oppose the US–Japan 2006 agreement realigning US bases on the island of Okinawa, to investigate US–Japan secret agreements on nuclear weapons dating back to the 1950s and 1960s, and to increase Japanese independence within the alliance relationship, including by establishing a new 'East Asia Community' that would exclude the United States. None of those positions suggests a radical revision of current security arrangements. But each of them threatens to embarrass or inconvenience Washington. And between them they do imply a new tone to the relationship: a tone more reminiscent of Ichiro Ozawa's 'Japan that can say no'.

Domestic politics

The alliance tensions need to be understood in the broader political context. The DPJ includes an eclectic mix of individuals: it covers almost the full range of the political spectrum from socialist left-wingers to former-LDP conservatives. The party itself was formed in 1998, as a merger of a number of smaller parties, and Ozawa's Liberal Party has since joined its ranks, adding to the initial diversity. The breadth of the party's membership has proven an electoral plus. But part of its problem in government was always going to be defining and hewing to a middle course that didn't spark excessive division within its own ranks. The allocation of cabinet slots reflects that priority. In the security portfolios, Katsuya Okada, the foreign minister, for example, tends to represent the moderate left of the party. The defence minister, Toshimi Kitazawa, is a little-known member of

the Upper House, unlikely to provoke division, or to attempt to steer defence policy independently of party heavyweights.

Moreover, a middle course is also critical for achieving a second objective: consolidating the government's hold in upper house elections due in 2010. To achieve that objective in 2007, the DPJ had to build a coalition government with two other parties: the left-wing Social Democratic Party (SDP), and the People's New Party (PNP), a centre-right conservative party formed principally by break away LDP politicians who opposed Koizumi's attempts to reform the Japanese postal service. Those coalition arrangements have accentuated the need for the government to reflect a broad range of views. But on some issues they have hardened specific DPJ policy positions. The SDP and the PNP, for example, favour renegotiating the relocation of the Futenma airbase on Okinawa, and the leader of the SDP has recently threatened to leave the coalition if her views were ignored on the issue.[1] Similarly, the coalition partners favour a renegotiation of the status of forces agreement that covers US force deployments in Japan, and termination of Japan's refuelling activities in the Indian Ocean in support of the mission in Afghanistan.

Reform, not revolution

So how much change are we likely to see in Japan's security policy? Certainly there's little evidence of a substantial grassroots push for change. Most analysts believe that Japan's weak economy, and the repulsion of the electorate from the old, tainted LDP were the key determinants of the DPJ's election victory, not its foreign and defence policies. They argue that it would be hard to read into the results much evidence of any strong demand amongst the Japanese electorate for a fundamental re-ordering of strategic policy.[2] But some analysts point out the DPJ's defence policies were attractive, and important, to particular sets of voters—Okinawans, for example, weary of the heavy US footprint on the island—meaning that the DPJ can't now easily abandon specific positions.[3]

Whatever the truth about the importance of the campaign promises for electoral outcomes, in the wake of the DPJ's victory, the Hatoyama government has been moving to give effect to its pledges. As a result, some old issues have resurfaced in the US–Japan defence relationship. Most of those issues revolve around the degree of Japanese strategic 'independence' that current arrangements allow, that theme being something of a unifying factor across the party. A recent analysis argues, in fact, that 'a common theme emerges from a careful reading of DPJ policy documents and public statements: that Japan's "passive" foreign policy needs to be transformed with clear-cut will into a new "independent diplomacy".'[4]

The 2006 US–Japan agreement on the relocation of the Futenma air base on Okinawa to the less-populated Camp Schwab (also on Okinawa) seems to have become a focus for those intra-alliance tensions. Robert Gates said the US wasn't interested in renegotiating the agreement. Subsequently, Kitazawa described the rules governing the US troop presence on Okinawa as 'humiliating'. President Obama, during his recent visit to Japan, said a high-level working group would try to find a solution using the 2006 agreement as the basis for that. But Hatoyama has since publicly rejected that position, saying a high-level working group would not be necessary if a basic solution already existed.

It would be wrong to think that the DPJ is hostile to the US–Japan alliance. It isn't. But, like the Rudd government here in Australia, it is less likely than its predecessor to endorse ideas of the US–Japan alliance evolving into a 'globalised' alliance—one that would require Japanese action and involvement far beyond its initially-defined geographic scope.[5] And the Futenma base issue is symptomatic of deeper and more enduring difficulties now pressing up against the alliance. A recent Special Report by the NBR (the National Bureau of Asian Research) in Seattle spelt out some of those difficulties, noting that the alliance is failing to meet the expectations of its partners and warning of 'a brittle partnership and an alliance that does not fully function.'[6]

Neither Tokyo nor Washington will want the divisions to run too deep. So the task ahead for both will be to smooth the ruffled waters of the relationship. The DPJ might well see its principal mission as growing the space for greater Japanese self-reliance in defence policy. In that sense its historical positioning is probably akin to the Whitlam government's in Australia: in the Japanese case, as in the Australian, strategic policy might push more towards greater self-reliance for the simple reason that a new generation of voters finds dependency shameful. The Hatoyama government is not intending to grow that space because it harbours nefarious designs on the future of Japan's strategic intentions—a DPJ government would be less likely to change the 'pacifist' Article 9 of the Constitution than an LDP government. Rather, its policy emphases tend to be multilateral and cooperative in nature. But its growing of that space will generate more options for those governments that come after it, some of which are bound to be of a more conservative persuasion. In short, Japanese defence policy is starting to take on more independent hues.

All that suggests the DPJ's main effect might not be an abrupt shift in policy direction, but something broader and less tangible: namely, the rise of a two-party political culture within the Japanese polity. As that culture shifts, two political effects will become more noticeable: the emergence of a set of national political debates across a range of topics—including strategy—that have traditionally been off-limits; and, in part because of the first effect, the relative strengthening of political decision-makers vis-à-vis their bureaucratic officials. As those effects become more evident, it would be reasonable to expect competing visions of Japanese national interests to become more clearly articulated in the public arena. Even without external pressures, more 'soft' competitions in nationalism might become more prevalent; and some further rebalancing of the alliance/self-reliance dynamic may occur.

The arrival of the DPJ isn't yet the harbinger of that 'resurgence of Japanese power and purpose' that Kenneth Pyle anticipated back in 2007.[7] But it might prove to be a catalyst to a set of changes more far-reaching than many now expect. Pyle noted then that Japanese 'elite politics were changing in three fundamental ways that promised to make foreign policymaking more complex and unpredictable: public opinion is becoming more important, the balance between bureaucrats and politicians is shifting, and generational change is underway.'[8] The 2009 election can certainly be seen as confirmation of the first two changes; whether Pyle's 'Heisei generation'—the generation which came to maturity after Emperor Akihito succeeded to the throne in 1989—will bring much innovation to strategic policy is still uncertain.

Australian interests

Australia has two major strategic interests at stake in relation to Japan: the US–Japan alliance, and its own bilateral strategic relationship with Japan. Australia has long had important interests at stake in the durability of the US 'hub-and-spokes' security arrangements that were constructed during the early decades of the Cold War. Those arrangements have provided a foundational structure for broader regional security, and not merely a set of bilateral partnerships. Of all the 'spokes', none has been more important than the US–Japan one. Indeed, some Australian strategists have typically judged the US–Japan alliance to be more effective in protecting Australian security than ANZUS itself.

So Canberra needs to be sensitive to the transformation of the alliance currently occurring in Northeast Asia. Not much of that transformation will turn upon the immediate surface issues that are now troubling policymakers on both sides of the Pacific. But the relationship itself is bound to become more of a focus for political debate within Japan, for the reasons outlined above.

In terms of the existing bilateral relationship, there's not much sign that the new government has yet given considered thought to the issue. But on the basis of the broad policy parameters, Australia should expect a warming of relations rather than a cooling of them. That's because the DPJ tends to interpret 'being more independent' as 'being less deferential to the US'.[9] The approach is not isolationist or insular in intent. Indeed, the spirit of Japanese engagement with other security partners seems likely to intensify under the new regime. The DPJ's broad foreign policy settings include strengthening relations with Asian neighbours,[10] and making more active contributions to the United Nations, both of which ought to provide an ongoing basis for the warming in Australia–Japan strategic and defence ties that has occurred in recent years.[11]

That growing strategic partnership represents the intersection of two different ideas: for Japan, the idea that it can have a strategic life apart from Washington; for Canberra, the idea that a Japan drawn more fully into a stabilising strategic role in the Asia–Pacific is a net benefit for regional security. The foundation for the partnership, therefore, turns more heavily upon Japan's policies and actions, than upon Australia's. It will be important for Australia to cement ties to the new government, and to make patterns of security cooperation between the two countries a bipartisan position in the changing world of Japanese politics.

Of course, if the relationship is to thrive in the longer term, it has to become something more than the intersection of two ideas, especially if we are entering a period when Japanese strategic policy is taking on more independent hues. When the bilateral strategic relationship was first developed, most commentators saw it as an opportunity to build upon Australia and Japan's shared membership of the US alliance structures from the Cold War. But its future might be a somewhat different one: as a critical link to one of the four major powers in Asia—the US, Japan, China and India—each of whom may be pursuing interests not fully compatible with the others. In that vision of the future, Australia still has some work to do, to identify congruent strategic interests in the Australia–Japan relationship and to treat those as something more substantive than a mere subset of the respective US alliances.

Endnotes

1. Isabel Reynolds (2009) 'Japan party threatens to leave government over US base', Reuters, 3 December
2. Michael Green and Nicholas Szechenyi (2009) 'US-Japan relations: interpreting change', *Comparative Connections*, October
3. See, for example, Yoshihide Soeya (2009) 'DPJ's foreign policy raises hopes…and worries', East Asia Forum, 18 November
4. Leif-Eric Easley, Tetsuo Kotani and Aki Mori (2010 forthcoming) 'Electing a new Japanese security policy? Examining foreign policy visions within the Democratic Party of Japan', *Asia Policy*, No. 9, January, pp.5-6
5. Leif-Eric Easley, Tetsuo Kotani and Aki Mori, 'Electing a new Japanese security policy?' p.7
6. Michael Finnigan (2009) *Managing unmet expectations in the US-Japan alliance*, NBR Special Report No. 17, November, p.3
7. Kenneth Pyle (2007) *Japan rising: the resurgence of Japanese power and purpose* (New York: Public Affairs)
8. Pyle, p.356
9. Easley, Kotani and Mori, p.6
10. A recent agreement between Japan and China to conduct their first joint military training exercise is testimony to that policy of engagement.
11. Andrew Shearer and Malcolm Cook (2009) *Going global: a new Australia-Japan agenda for multilateral cooperation* (Sydney: Lowy Institute)

About the author

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