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COULD THE NEW JAPANESE GOVERNMENT HERALD NOVEL DEPARTURES IN SECURITY POLICY?

— Tsuneo “Nabe” Watanabe

Yukio Hatoyama, of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), was elected as Japan’s prime minister on September 16, 2009. This new Japanese administration is widely seen as heralding a new era in Japanese politics. Questions therefore arise not only about politics in the domestic arena but in the foreign and security policy sphere as well.

To outsiders, the sheer stability (or inertia) of the Japanese political system is often a source of amazement. Prior to the advent of the new administration, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) had monopolized control of the government (either alone or as part of a coalition) ever since it was formed from a merger of conservative forces in 1955, except, that is, for an interlude of less than a year in 1993–1994, when power passed briefly to a coalition of anti-LDP forces led first by Morihiro Hosokawa and then by Tsutomu Hata.

A democratic system lasting a half-century without a full-fledged shift in power is quite a historical anomaly. Political scientists have studied postwar Japan’s single-party rule extensively, and most agree that it was made possible by two key circumstances: Japan’s extended period of strong economic growth and the stable international structure imposed by the Cold War.

In recent years, however, the dynamics have changed. First, a changing environment has removed the basic conditions—rapid economic growth and the relatively uniform distribution of wealth—that once guaranteed the loyalty of the LDP’s key domestic constituencies. Second, the public has been witness time and again to the kinds of problems that occur when a single party stays in power too long—“system fatigue” characterized by corruption, overdependence on the bureaucracy, and bureaucratic inefficiency.

Policy agenda of the Hatoyama cabinet

The Hatoyama administration’s approval ratings stand at more than 70 percent. That popularity is mainly driven by domestic factors, but Japanese voters have long hoped for a leader who could offer the country a more significant role on the international stage. What does this mean for a U.S.-led Western alliance that has become used to predictability and stability in the management and direction of Japanese foreign and security policy?

Hatoyama has already raised eyebrows in that respect in both Japan and the United States. A New York Times editorial on September 1, for example, expressed one concern about Japan that the Obama administration must be looking at nervously, pointing to Hatoyama’s suggestion that Japan not renew the mandate for Japanese ships on a refueling mission in the Indian Ocean in support of United States military operations in Afghanistan.

A meeting between Hatoyama and U.S. President Barack Obama on September 24 produced the standard diplomatic mantras reaffirming both countries’ commitment to the Japan-U.S. alliance as a bedrock of mutual security. However, both leaders avoided contentious issues, leaving the precise trajectory of U.S.-Japanese relations as an open question. With this in mind, the DPJ’s record is not altogether encouraging. For example, apart from its attitude to the Indian Ocean refueling mission, its 2008 policy platform called for building a more “equal relationship” with the United States and suggested that it would seek to revise the Japan-U.S. Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA).

With regard to the transfer of facilities at Futenma Air Station in Okinawa—something the two governments have spent years negotiating—the

DPJ is calling for a solution different from that already agreed on by Tokyo and Washington. By throwing a last-minute wrench in the works, the new government threatens to provoke the ire of the Obama administration and to call into question Japan's status as a reliable partner.

The policy direction of a DPJ administration vis-à-vis the Japan-U.S. alliance is difficult to predict in part because the party encompasses both realists in the LDP mold who support the alliance and politicians of a more liberal bent, not to mention former members of the Social Democratic Party (SDP). Moreover, even if the DPJ takes control of the House of Representatives, it may well be obliged to forge a coalition with the SDP in order to control the House of Councillors, where it lacks a majority—another source of anxiety for some government officials and allies.

On a more hopeful note, there are grounds for optimism in relations with regional rivals and old enemies. The LDP has long included a minority contingent inclined toward a conservative or nationalistic brand of historical revisionism, which has been the cause of periodic flare-ups with China and South Korea. Since the DPJ has few members thinking or talking along such lines, we may at least see a thaw in diplomatic disputes over the “rewriting of history.” This could act as a stabilizing factor for the security and stability of the region.

More broadly, I believe that concerns about the DPJ's impact on diplomacy, foreign policy, and international security have been overstated. Once the party gets used to the quotidian reality of government as opposed to opposition, it will be forced to respond to circumstances realistically. Questioned on the matter during a symposium in Tokyo in June, Richard Armitage, deputy secretary of state under former U.S. President George W. Bush and a vigorous supporter of the Japan-U.S. alliance, pointed out that campaign rhetoric and actual policy are two entirely different things. Indeed, DPJ leaders have already shown signs of pragmatism, indicating that radical departures are unlikely.

There are three alliance-related issues that now stand at the forefront of international diplomacy, and that form the key questions about how Japan's foreign and security policy will develop with respect to the United States and the wider world:

1. Will Japan in fact quit the refueling mission in the Indian Ocean?
2. Will Japan seek a renegotiation of existing relocation plans for U.S. forces in Japan including the Futenma Airbase, which is located in a densely populated residential area?

3. Will Japan ask the United States to negotiate a new deal on SOFA, opening the prospect of greater Japanese jurisdiction over U.S. military officers in Japan?

There are obvious potential headaches over some, if not all, of the above for the Obama administration. Perhaps the most troublesome concerns the question of relocating the Futenma Airbase to Camp Schwab within Okinawa. Many DPJ and SDP supporters want Futenma out of Okinawa completely. At the same time, the existing agreed plan includes moving 8,000 U.S. Marines to Guam and the return of land south of the Kadena Air Base. These are significant steps aimed at reducing the burden on the Okinawan people. Currently, Prime Minister Hatoyama is sending mixed signals on what he wants the final outcome to look like.

Futenma, of course, has been a thorn in the Japan-U.S. alliance since it was originally enacted in 1996 between then-Prime Minister Hashimoto and then-U.S. President Bill Clinton. If Hatoyama shows a willingness to remove that thorn, this would be a good boost for Japan-U.S. alliance management. For example, the United States might accept Japan's civilian aid plan for Afghan reconstruction as an alternative to the current refueling mission in the Indian Ocean. SOFA revision may still be tough, but it would not be impossible to at least formulate a study group to try and resolve it.

Long-term prospects amid new political realities

All in all, despite some possible confusion in the short term, I am optimistic for the Hatoyama administration's security and foreign policy in the longer term. At the very least, there is a good chance that Japan can break free from the stagnant agendas that became a fact of life for Japan's relations with the outside world during decades of rule by the LDP.

Lest anyone forget, Japan has pursued a policy of extreme self-restraint in the use of its military. This, of course, has been due to deeply ingrained anti-war sentiment arising from World War II as well as postwar political structures dating from 1955. Such political structures and historical legacies failed to foster rational policy debates in the Japanese Parliament based on a rounded analysis of the international environment.

The SDP, historically the largest opposition party, and the Japan Communist Party never accepted military cooperation with the United States. Both parties strongly opposed any attempts at moves in this direction as well as those aimed at strengthening Japan's defense capabilities. In order

to maintain smooth relations between government and opposition in parliament and in deference to deep-seated anti-war sentiments among the general public, LDP-led governments were never successful in changing the prevailing interpretation of the pacifist Article 9 of the constitution. This has left legal and political obstacles in the way of any Japanese government wanting to send troops to conflict zones.

However, the social democratic and communist presence in high politics continues to shrink. The largest opposition party is now the conservative Liberal Democratic Party. Theoretically, Japan's new political realities could allow for more rational policy choices in the security arena than we have seen for much of Japan's postwar history.

Hatoyama has in fact made positive noises in favor of amending the constitution, including Article 9. He inherited the idea from his grandfather, Ichiro Hatoyama, who served as prime minister from 1954 to 1956, and who proposed amending the constitution as well as Japanese rearmament. Another powerful DPJ leader, party Secretary General Ichiro Ozawa, once argued that Japan could send self-defense forces to conflict zones, which would allow Japanese forces to fight if the mission were authorized by the United Nations. He was an advocate for Japan as a "normal" nation in his 1994 book, *Blueprint for a New Japan*. As Japan's history from 1955 to 2009 shows, a critical precondition for developing Japan's thinking on security policy is a political structure that enables constructive policy debates.

Former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's bold decision to send troops to Iraq in 2003 was only possible with the DPJ functioning as a less ideological and more pragmatic opposition party. Nonetheless, Article 9 remained a major obstacle and any efforts to tamper with it were still seen as extremely politically risky. The challenge for the current administration, as well as for the ones that will follow it, is to find a way to adapt Article 9 so that it does not remain such an obstacle in the future.

In sum, Japan's new political realities could potentially enable many things that were once considered impossible. The birth of the DPJ government could yet herald a new beginning for Japan's role in the international security arena.

Tsuneo "Nabe" Watanabe is director for Foreign & Security Policy Research and senior fellow of the Tokyo Foundation. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

