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Japanese Foreign Policy under Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda

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In the immediate aftermath of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's sudden resignation on September 12, 2007, it appeared as though Abe's former foreign minister, Taro Aso, was certain to become Japan's new prime minister. Nevertheless, on September 23, Yasuo Fukuda, a widely respected party elder and son of former Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda, was elected president of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and subsequently as prime minister of Japan. Fukuda was chosen largely because of his reputation as a moderate, his collaborative style, and the personal and political distance between him and Abe. While an Aso administration would have signaled continuity in foreign policy, Fukuda is likely to shift gears and adopt a more subtle approach to foreign affairs.

Prime Minister Fukuda inherits a number of very serious foreign policy challenges that demand the government's immediate attention, ranging from the North Korea issue to the extension of the Anti-terrorism Special Measures Law. The following pages will address several questions about Fukuda's election and its implications for Japan's foreign policy.

1. What are some of the core ideas that will provide the foundation for the new administration's foreign policy?

First, Prime Minister Fukuda believes that foreign policy should be created through a process that involves joint consultations between popularly elected politicians (necessarily policy-generalists) and experts in the professional foreign policy establishment. He is a strong advocate of a pragmatic approach to foreign affairs and is unlikely to push a nationalistic or populist agenda.

Second, Prime Minister Fukuda has long held the conviction that Japan's foreign policy should not be thought of in zero-sum terms as a choice between regionalism and its alliance with the United States. Rather, he has expressed the belief that proactive and constructive relations toward both the region and Japan's most important ally are not only in Japan's national interest but can also be mutually reinforcing: strong ties with the United States facilitate regional economic growth and security, while expanded links with East Asia would keep the United States engaged in the region and facilitate deeper bilateral and multilateral ties.

2. Where does Mr. Fukuda stand on visits to Yasukuni Shrine and relations with China and South Korea, and what kind of approach toward the region can be expected from his administration?

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's repeated visits to Yasukuni Shrine damaged Japan's political relations with several East Asian countries, particularly China and South Korea. His successor, Prime Minister Abe, surprised many pundits by making improved relations with China and South Korea a clear priority during the first month of his administration. This behavior stood in stark contrast to the hard line his administration adopted vis-à-vis North Korea.

Prime Minister Fukuda has always been something of a realist when it comes to Japan's relations with its neighbors. Throughout his tenure as former Prime Minister Koizumi's chief cabinet secretary, Fukuda cautioned Koizumi about his visits to Yasukuni Shrine given the negative impact he knew these visits would have on Japan's relationships with countries in the region. In contrast to Koizumi's successor, Shinzo Abe, who consistently refused to comment on the issue, Fukuda has already made a number of public commitments that he will not go to Yasukuni Shrine while prime minister.

One of Prime Minister Fukuda's main foreign policy goals may be a kind of grand bargain with China, not only concerning bilateral issues but also with regard to Japan and China's respective roles in the region, particularly in the field of community building. In order to achieve this grand bargain, he will avoid actions likely to provoke anti-Japanese sentiment and instead focus on complementary interests. He can be expected to push for an expansion of substantive dialogue and cooperation with China on energy security and the environment, in addition to other issues of common concern.

Regarding North Korea, in Japan "the North Korea issue" refers not only to international concerns about nuclear proliferation but also to the whereabouts of a number of Japanese citizens who were abducted by North Korean agents in the 1970s and 1980s. Even prior to the election campaign, Fukuda had long been critical of a hard-line stance, stating on many occasions that Japan's interests would be better served if it were to engage North Korea and

create an environment in which the two parties can sit down to serious negotiations on such issues of concern for bilateral relations. As prime minister, Fukuda will expand efforts to find a constructive resolution to the abductees issue and set the stage for Japan to make a more proactive contribution to the Six-Party Talks.

Regarding Prime Minister Fukuda's attitude toward East Asia, if speeches given during his campaign for the LDP presidency are any indication, his administration will place an increased focus on regional community-building efforts. His basic view of Japan's role in the region—which continues to be heavily influenced by his father's famous 1977 speech in Manila—is that while Japan has an important leadership role to play in East Asia, its leaders must be sure to fully acknowledge and respect its political, religious, and cultural diversity. Consequently, far from using values as a rubric for dividing states into ideological camps, Fukuda has indicated that Japan's interests would be best served by adopting a low-key approach and proactively engaging the region as a whole in a process of inclusive multilateralism. Thus, while conceding that the spread of democratic values should be viewed as a long-term goal for the region, the new administration will probably take care to avoid policies or rhetoric that could be interpreted as attempting to impose such values upon its neighbors.

3. What are the prospects for the Anti-terrorism Special Measures Law under Prime Minister Fukuda?

The Anti-terrorism Special Measures Law is set to automatically expire on November 1st, and opposition leader and Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) President Ichiro Ozawa has vowed to derail any LDP efforts to support an extension. For Prime Minister Fukuda, the significance of the debate over extension of the law (or new legislation that either party may introduce to replace it) transcends the issue of the Self-Defense Forces' (SDF) role in the Indian Ocean. Rather, it serves as a litmus test of his administration's ability to overcome the challenge posed by the DPJ's unprecedented majority in the Upper House and successfully work together with the opposition in the formulation of policy, foreign or otherwise.

These are largely uncharted waters for the LDP, which until the July 2007 election had successfully steamrolled most post-9/11 foreign policy legislation through the Diet. While the makeup of the Lower House could change at any moment if the prime minister calls for a general election, the ruling coalition will continue to face a majority opposition in the Upper House at least until the next election in 2010. Although the LDP-Komeito coalition's overwhelming majority in the Lower House means that it could technically force passage of the extension even without Upper House sanction, Prime Minister Fukuda has made it clear that major policy initiatives will henceforth have to garner at least minimal opposition support if the government wishes to avoid three years of legislative gridlock.

In light of these circumstances, the November 1st deadline for extension will likely pass and the Special Measures Law will automatically expire. Fukuda's most important task will be to clarify the rationale for the SDF dispatch to the Japanese people and encourage public debate on the issue. Such a process will ensure that future legislation receives widespread understanding and support.

4. Does Abe's resignation, coupled with Aso's defeat in the LDP presidential election, signal the end of Japan's pursuit of status as a more "normal" nation? What is the significance of these developments for Article 9? Is constitutional revision off the table for the foreseeable future?

While Prime Ministers Fukuda and Abe may not share an identical vision for Japan's future, it would be a mistake to classify the new prime minister as a dove or isolationist. In fact, he has repeatedly expressed a desire to more clearly define Japan's role and responsibilities in the international community. For example, during his time as chief cabinet secretary under former Prime Minister Koizumi, Fukuda made an extensive effort to garner support for a basic law concerning dispatch of the SDF.* He

* Distinct from ad-hoc legislation (e.g. the Anti-terrorism Special Measures Law), which is only valid for specific missions and automatically expires without periodic extension, a basic law would permanently clarify the circumstances under which the government can and cannot dispatch the SDF overseas.

is likely to push this initiative again, this time aiming to enact a law that will receive widespread and supra-partisan support.

While it is improbable that Prime Minister Fukuda, unlike his predecessor, will become an impassioned advocate of textual revision of the constitution in light of the current political climate, he will most likely support efforts to change the government's official interpretation of the constitution's Article 9. This new interpretation would aim to expand the SDF's mandate to include participation in international operations that have received sanction from the United Nations Security Council. The fact that opposition leader Ichiro Ozawa has called for the SDF to adopt a similar role suggests that the prospects for such a reinterpretation are quite good.

5. What is the long-term significance of the DPJ's intense opposition to the extension of the Anti-terrorism Special Measures Law? Does it indicate that US-Japan relations have once again become a fault line in Japan's domestic politics?

Developments in the wake of the DPJ's acquisition of a majority in the Upper House this past July have made it abundantly clear that from now on the opposition will play an increasingly significant role in the formulation of Japan's foreign policy. While the US-Japan alliance is unlikely to become a divisive issue in domestic politics to the extent that it did in the immediate post-war era, debate over its substance will probably become a focal point of intra-governmental deliberations over foreign policy for the foreseeable future.

While some overseas Japan watchers may be tempted to frame the ongoing debate over extension of the Anti-terrorism Special Measures Law in absolute terms as a question of "alliance with the United States: yes or no?" this, simply put, is not accurate. The DPJ's insistence on UN sanction as a prerequisite for SDF participation in overseas activities, as well as Japan's growing support for regionalism and community-building activities in East Asia, far from signaling a declining interest in the United States, are both part of a natural evolution in Japan's foreign policy in an increasingly multipolar and globalizing world. Japan is

not alone in this regard, as changes in US foreign policy during President Bush's second term suggest that the United States is also in the midst of a similar shift toward multilateralism. Foreign policy speeches by both Democratic and Republican presidential candidates suggest that this shift will continue for the foreseeable future.

No matter how events play out in the coming weeks and months, it is absolutely clear that there will continue to be a need for extensive bilateral consultations over foreign policy. In order

to ensure that the alliance remains strong, leaders must use these consultations to clarify misunderstandings, facilitate linkages between the United States and East Asia, coordinate future participation in multilateral activities, and reaffirm the US-Japan alliance.

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