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THE NEW DPJ GOVERNMENT: HOPE FOR DEMOCRATIC FOREIGN POLICY MAKING

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A time of confusion will be unavoidable in Japanese politics, for the recent change of government was aimed at transforming Japan's power structure. By reducing the opacity of intra-government coordination, however, the Japanese policy-making process can be made more transparent. On the diplomatic front, the new government is expected to map out a clear basic policy on a democratic basis.

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Japanese party politics has entered a new stage. Nevertheless, because the main mission of the Yukio Hatoyama Cabinet is the overhaul of Japanese policy through a transformation of the power structure, the overall picture of the new policy has yet to be revealed. That is why, despite the dramatic transfer of seats in the Lower House, the victory of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) has only yielded a “quiet” change of government generating both expectations and anxiety. The Japanese electorate, who voted for the change of government, was not simply tired of the poor political management of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). What they sought was a transformation of the Japanese power structure, including the interest groups and bureaucracies that had underpinned the LDP’s rule.

The transformation of the power structure by the new government will increase the range of policy options available to the Japanese government. The existing system offers only a limited range of policy changes, with bureaucrats making policies by fine-tuning their own interests with those of interest groups and politicians with close ties to special interests. Some options have had to be abandoned from the outset because of the difficulty of coordinating interests. Increasing the chance of turning such options into policies is one of the objectives of the recent change of government.


Foreign policy is considered to be a challenge for the new government. There are great ambiguities over the new government’s foreign policy, reflecting the fact that the new government has no clear mandate for foreign affairs because the change of government was prompted by a stalemate in domestic affairs. If the purpose of the new government lies in increasing the range of policy options, though, it would be meaningful for the new government to review past policies and initiate new discussions, regardless of the success of negotiations.

Furthermore, the transformation of the power structure may change the structure of the foreign policy debate. When a foreign policy matter becomes a political issue in Japan, it has often been the case that a small circle of people led by diplomatic officials familiar with the situation deal with the matter, while those in political circles and the media who do not share in the information make

one-sided criticisms of the government. This has made calm discussions extremely difficult.

Diplomatic officials “in the loop” and their foreign counterparts take pride in having somehow crafted realistic agreements despite noisy criticism. For them, the new government’s proposals on reviewing agreements forged with the United States and making public the secret pact that Japan was obliged to make with the US may appear barbaric. That is why foreign relations specialists, with some exceptions, are expressing concern about the new government and its foreign policy.

A review of foreign policy by the new government has the potential of developing a healthier foreign policy debate in Japan by taking discussions out of closed circles and allowing more responsible politicians to participate. If the process works successfully, there is a chance of Japan developing a stable foreign policy that has a more democratic basis.

When the DPJ administration attempts to expose past problems and shift policies, it needs to keep in mind that this is for the sake of garnering healthy democratic support for its foreign policy. Meanwhile, those who have been in the inner circle need to understand what the change of government means and try to lead the way in a constructive direction. 

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