

Hatoyama's International Policy

From Confusion to New Strategies?

By Akihiko TANAKA

Revolution in Foreign Policy, Too?

The victory of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) in the general election last summer brought about a revolutionary change in Japanese politics. It brought to an end the long dominance of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) lasting more than a half-century since 1955, signifying the evolution of the Japanese political system from one-party dominance to a two-party system. The DPJ-led government under Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama also attempted to change the dominance of career bureaucrats in governmental decision-making. Hatoyama abolished a meeting of vice ministers, which had regularly been held before the biweekly Cabinet meeting to finalize the agenda of Cabinet decisions and thus make the Cabinet virtually a rubber-stamp organization. Within each ministry, the members of parliament assigned to ministerial posts – the minister, senior vice ministers, and parliamentary secretaries – took over substantive power previously held by the administrative vice minister and director generals of various bureaus. The Japanese political process is undergoing unprecedented changes both in the parliament and in the administration.

Foreign policy, however, does not show similarly radical changes. The first 100 days of Hatoyama's foreign policy were featured more by confusion mainly as a result of the strains in the management of the Japan-US alliance. The issue of the relocation of Futenma Air Station, the operating center of US marines located in the midst of an urban area in Okinawa, is the case in point. The Cabinet members of the Hatoyama government did not seem to agree on a single alternative to the relocation. At one point, Defense Minister Toshimi Kitazawa indicated the original plan, made under the LDP government relocating the base to the Henoko area of Nago city in Okinawa, was the only realistic solution. On another occasion, Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada suggested incorporating the base into Kadena Air Base in the center of Okinawa. On still another occasion, Hatoyama maintained the option of relocating the base to areas outside Okinawa or Japan. In the meantime, US officials, including Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, insisted the original plan was the only one accept-

able to the United States. Strains thus created over the equivocation of the Hatoyama government are not the signs of "more equal relations" between Tokyo and Washington that Hatoyama promised to realize during the election campaign.

However, the confusion in Japan-US alliance management was not brought about by the DPJ's deliberate policy. It has more to do with domestic politics; despite its overwhelming victory in the lower house election last August, the DPJ is a few seats short of majority in the upper house and needs cooperation of smaller parties.

The support of the Social Democratic Party and the People's New Party, with which the DPJ formed a coalition government, is needed in order to secure passage of important bills in both houses of the Diet. The Social Democrats threatened to split the coalition if the government went ahead with the original plan. Hatoyama, trying to satisfy both the United States and the Social Democrats (and many Okinawans), could not help equivocating and frustrating both. This political situation may change as a result of the coming upper house election in July this year if it gives the majority to the DPJ as generally expected. But the local condition in Okinawa may become more rigid than now and Hatoyama may have to risk antagonizing Okinawans when he needs to make his final decision.

This episode inadvertently revealed a significant characteristic of the DPJ; while the DPJ is revolutionary in its process-reform orienta-

Photo: Kyodo News



People stage a sit-in rally in opposition to the planned relocation of the US Futenma air base in southern Okinawa to the Henoko area in Nago City in the central part of the island prefecture. The sit-in protest has continued for more than 2,000 days.

Photo: Kyodo News



(From left) Chinese Commerce Minister Chen Deming, Japanese trade minister Masayuki Naoshima and their South Korean counterpart Kim Jong Hoon shake hands during their meeting in Hua Hin, Thailand, on Oct. 25, 2009. The three countries agreed to begin in 2010 to study the possibility of forging a trilateral free trade agreement.

tion, it is a loose group of politicians of different persuasion in their substantive policy orientation. Most DPJ leaders agree on the necessity to terminate the domination of the LDP and the bureaucracy in the policy formulation process, but they have divergent opinions on what the policies themselves should be. On the issue of the Fudemma relocation, the DPJ itself did not seem to have a solid and single opinion. In many ways, the DPJ gave priority to uniting their members and supporters around the necessity to reform Japan's policy process, postponing the deliberation of solidifying their policies and making them consistent with each other. Lack of agreements on policy details and lack of consistency among different policies were apparent in areas other than foreign policy, too. As it turned out, the DPJ had to give up a tax reduction on gasoline, one of its campaign promises, in order to save another important policy promise of distributing childcare subsidies to all families with children.

Bold Initiatives in Climate Change

Not all items on the foreign policy agenda have been as baffling as the Fudemma issue, however. The policy to tackle climate change is the most ambitious one that Hatoyama pronounced when he became prime minister. He set the goal of reducing the CO₂ emission by 25% from the level of 1990 by 2020 if all major emitters join a post-Kyoto international framework. Making a bold promise in international negotiations had never been a characteristic of Japanese foreign policy. It was too much of a caricature to describe Japan as a country acting only under foreign pressure and doing "too little and too late." But Japan had a tendency to make international promises only after calculating effects of concrete measures from the bottom-

up. It rarely took top-down initiatives. In this sense, Hatoyama's pronouncement of 25% CO₂ reduction well ahead of the COP15 meeting in Copenhagen was new to Japan's foreign policy. This is consistent with the priority of the DPJ to stress process reform; the DPJ leadership had been frustrated with the previous Japanese process of "too little and too late" and hence attempted to take initiatives in areas where they believe that Japan is strong.

This initiative, however, may face serious challenges when it comes to concrete measures. Immediately after Hatoyama's pronouncement, many business leaders pointed out that it was almost impossible for the Japanese business community to achieve the goal; they maintained that Japanese businesses had already taken substantive measures to boost energy efficiency before 1990 and that the new goal simply added a specter of

negative impact on the entire economy. The estimates of the economic impact of the Hatoyama plan made by several research institutions varied but were generally negative. The government now needs to make the plan more concrete so they can be implemented as international negotiations proceed.

East Asian Community?

Another promising area of foreign policy is policy toward neighboring countries. Hatoyama emphasized the vision of realizing an East Asian Community. Immediately after becoming prime minister, he visited South Korea and China, and attended various conferences in East Asia. Believing that Japan's relations with its immediate neighbors, South Korea and China, became unnecessarily bad during the Koizumi administration, Hatoyama seems determined to improve Japan's relations with Seoul and Beijing. As the DPJ is more forthcoming than the LDP in coming to terms with Japan's own history, the DPJ government seems to have a better opportunity to work with the neighboring countries without repeating the controversies over history that afflicted Tokyo's relations with Seoul and Beijing.

However, details matter here too. It is good to use a nice concept such as an East Asian Community, but when it comes to details, Hatoyama is rather ambiguous. Despite the strained relations with the neighboring countries during his administration, then Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi propagated his idea of creating an East Asian Community and the Japanese bureaucracy, especially the Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, made various concrete proposals to strengthen community-building in East Asia. On the one hand, Hatoyama may be tempted to follow the logic of "anything but the LDP" and to try some policies simply

because they are different from those of the previous administration. But on the other hand, what Hatoyama and Okada, his foreign minister, actually say about community-building so far have more commonality than difference with its specifics drawn up by LDP politicians.

National Strategies Needed

All in all, the DPJ is striving to introduce new processes in politics, but it is yet to formulate new realistic and coherent contents. Hatoyama and his DPJ should spend the following few months to formulate new sets of national strategies. There are several components for such strategies. First, the DPJ government has to craft its own national security strategy. The previous LDP government asked a panel of experts to prepare a report to draw up a New National Defense Guideline originally planned to be decided by the end of 2009. As a result of the LDP's defeat in the general election, the report was shelved and the DPJ decided to postpone writing a new guideline for one year. As a basis of Japan's international policy, Hatoyama should start a new mechanism to prepare a new national security policy. The Futenma issue should be properly put in a bigger perspective of setting a new national security strategy. Given the policy difference between the Social Democrats and the DPJ's mainstream security specialists, however, the DPJ may need to target the date of finalizing the strategy after the July upper house election when it is expected to become possible for the DPJ to form its own government without coalition partners.

Second, the Hatoyama government needs to formulate its own science and technology strategy. The recent budget-making deliberation initiated by the DPJ demonstrated that the Hatoyama government did not have any coherent science and technology strategy other than cutting seemingly wasteful and duplicate uses of funds for science and technology. But another important goal of Hatoyama, the climate change policy, is not possible without better use of achievements in science and technology. Furthermore, as other emerging economies are rapidly expanding in size, Japan needs to pursue technologically more advanced production. It is now essential for the government to prepare a national strategy to prioritize and better use funds for science and technology.

Third, Hatoyama should reshape his East Asian Community idea and clarify Japan's regional strategy incorporating policy toward immediate neighbors, policy toward East Asia, policy toward broader Asia and policy toward the Asia-Pacific region. As the prime minister maintains, it is premature to talk about the boundary of an East Asian Community and it is important to chart a community vision in the long run. But the contents of policies that lead eventually to such a community should be defined more concretely and on various levels. Bilateral policies should be clarified, be they China policy or South Korea policy. It is now important to utilize various existing trilateral frameworks such as the Japan-China-South Korean summit and the Japan-US-South Korean dialogue as well as to create new ones – for example, a Japan-US-China strategic dialogue. It must also decide how to prioritize and sort out the policy allocations among overlapping multilateral frameworks such as the ASEAN+3, East Asia Summit and APEC processes.

In order to formulate such overlapping regional policies, it is important for the Hatoyama government to clarify its posture on trade liberalization. DPJ politicians and supporters appear quite divergent on this issue. Some argue for free-trade areas in East Asia and/or a Japan-US free trade area while others call for adequate support of farmers and unions. But without making clear commitments to liberalization and harmonization of trading systems, it is moot to talk about community-building in East Asia as the economy is the strongest glue connecting Asian countries. Again, even if it seems easier to formulate a coherent policy after the July election, Hatoyama is better advised to sort out the pros and cons of various arguments before then.

In addition to economic cooperation in the region, what needs to be pursued more in Japan's international policy is people-to-people interaction at various levels. The government is trying to multiply the number of tourists into Japan. Then it is necessary to examine the current visa system. Increasing visa waivers should be natural consideration. The previous government under the LDP set up the goal of increasing the number of international students to 300,000 by 2020 from the current level of some 120,000. Whether the Hatoyama government continues this policy is unclear. The mechanical attainment of such a goal may not mean much, but the DPJ should consider what should be the meaningful policy to "internationalize" Japanese colleges and universities. Recently, it is often pointed out that the number of Japanese students willing to study abroad is decreasing. For community-building and globalization of Japanese society, the government should also consider policies to encourage Japanese students to have more international experience.

Given the current Japanese electoral system, the DPJ is expected to be in power for the coming three years or longer even if the party may choose a different leader than Hatoyama as prime minister. In this sense, it is not necessary for the DPJ to be too hasty in formulating its national strategies in various fields. As a party to reform the policy process, it is understandable for the DPJ to concentrate first of all on devising a more transparent and effective system of decision-making internally.

But in the area of international relations, Hatoyama and other leaders of the DPJ should not be tempted to pursue certain policies only because they are different from LDP policies. No matter whether under the LDP or the DPJ, what Japan can and should do internationally is fairly obvious. Based on a solid alliance relationship with the United States, Japan should continue to explore better relations with Asian neighbors, trying to increase measures useful for long-term community-building. Strengthening its power base largely derived from knowledge production, Japan should continue to pursue more and more sophisticated economic production. As an advanced industrial society rapidly aging and with long experience in boosting the efficiency of energy use, promoting environmental protection and fighting natural disasters, Japan should continue to act globally to resolve issues of global concern. **JS**

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