

Two Major Foreign Policy Issues in Japanese Politics

By *Shiraishi Takashi*

THE snap election called by Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro was held on September 11. Koizumi made the issue of postal reform the centerpiece of his election campaign, but the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) under Okada Katsuya argued that there were other important issues besides postal reform which needed to be addressed by the government.

What was notable about this election campaign was the lack of real debate between the two major contending parties. This was not simply a question of differences in their campaign strategies. Rather, it was due to a fundamental lack of clarity in their positions on the vital question of Japan's future. In particular, there was a great deal of confusion surrounding the question of what to do with the so-called "Japan model" of a

capitalist and welfare society built on the promise of equality and prosperity.

Because of the ballooning government debt and the aging population, the creation of such an ideal society is incredibly difficult. Japan's future can be spelled out in terms of two opposing poles: efficiency vs. fairness. Efficiency would demand the streamlining of the bloated government and the elimination of wasteful expenditure, while fairness calls for protecting the weak, the poor and the elderly. All the smaller parties such as the Communist Party, the Social Democratic Party, and the new parties created by former members of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) advocated retaining the Japan model. This means putting heavy emphasis on the question of fairness. The LDP under Koizumi which had purged the "conser-

vatives" moved its position closer to the pole of efficiency, while the DPJ had opted for the middle ground between fairness and efficiency because its own members have been deeply divided over these issues.

Unfortunately, foreign policy has not figured significantly in the public debate, while both the LDP and the DPJ have interestingly clearly stated their positions. Both parties have acknowledged the importance of the Japan-US alliance and have called for the creation of an East Asian Community. However, there have been subtle but significant differences in their positions.

The LDP has adopted a confident-nationalist stance, or *rin to shita gaiko* which is hard to translate but can be roughly rendered as a "head held high" posture. It has argued that the Japan-US alliance and international cooperation are the two main bases of Japan's diplomacy, and has envisioned peaceful diplomacy through international cooperation on the bedrock of the Japan-US alliance. It has also called for confident leadership in Asian diplomacy, improved relations with China, South Korea and other neighboring countries and the promotion of an Asian "community." I should add that the "nationalist" stance of the LDP has been different from the inward-looking, Japan-centric nationalism which is advocated by some politicians, intellectuals and people whose opinions have been aired in conservative newspapers and small-circulation magazines.

The DPJ has aimed to pursue enlightened national interests by promising to create a peaceful and prosperous Asia by earning the trust of neighboring countries, reconstructing Japan-China relations, strengthening Japan-South Korea relations, and building an East Asian Community. It has also called for the "evolution" of Japan-US relations, promising to strengthen the Japan-US alliance for the prosperity of the Asia-Pacific region while arguing that Japan should not simply follow the United States but express the concerns of the people of Japan and the Asia-Pacific

Photo: Kyodo News



The LDP under Koizumi (second from left) won an overwhelming victory in the recent election

Photo: Kyodo News

region and, if necessary, advocate restraint on the part of the Americans.

These two positions show how much the bases for debate have shifted over the last two decades. Whether or not to support the Japan-US alliance in connection with the Constitution had been the main issue during the Cold War era, but both parties now have agreed on the strategic importance of affirming the Japan-US alliance and creating an East Asian Community. Where they differ is the emphasis and the nuance of their positions. This is in part because the Americans are concerned about the formation of the East Asian Community, which they equate with the creation of a China-led regional order. The other reason is the chilled relationship between Japan-China and Japan-South Korea.

That American fear of the East Asian Community being led by China is largely unfounded. Community-building in East Asia is different from the European experience. While the members of the European Union (EU) have agreed to concede part of their sovereignty to the EU, the basic principles of East Asian regional cooperation are rooted in mutual respect for sovereignty as well as amity and cooperation. The idea of building an East Asian Community was a product of the Asian Economic Crisis of 1997-1998, during which the International Monetary Fund (IMF) rescue packages and the United States were criticized by Asian countries as the imposition of American-style globalization. The first ASEAN+3 (Japan, China, and South Korea) summit was held in the midst of the crisis in 1997 to deal with the problems confronting the region without American involvement. Therefore, it cannot be denied that an element of anti-Americanism initially colored the conceptualization of the East Asian Community.

Anti-Americanism is, however, no longer a driving force for community-building. Far more important, the creation of the East Asian Community is not proceeding under Chinese hegemony, nor is it the creation of a China-led regional order. These are obvious in the



ASEAN+3 Foreign Ministers meeting at Vientiane, Laos, on July 27, 2005

kinds of architecture evolving in the name of East Asian Community creation.

In the realms of currency and finance, the ASEAN+3 summit in 2000 agreed on the Chiang Mai Initiative, the crisis-management mechanism built on bilateral currency swap agreements among the ASEAN+3 members. In the realm of trade cooperation, free trade agreements (FTAs) and economic-partnership agreements (EPAs) are being negotiated and concluded between ASEAN and Japan, China, South Korea and India respectively and between ASEAN, Australia and New Zealand as a bundle of ASEAN+1 agreements. The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the upcoming East Asia Summit in December all have ASEAN as their hub.

This shows that the fundamental feature of regional cooperation in East Asia are based on a network with ASEAN as the hub. Neither Japan nor China has assumed any leadership in initiating regional cooperation, and if the United States wants to be a part of East Asian Community creation, it can elect to play an important role, especially in APEC and ARF, and in the realms of security and energy cooperation.

What is at issue here is not the question of compatibility between the Japan-US alliance and East Asian Community building. What is at stake, first of all, is the question of how to improve Japan-China and Japan-South Korea relations. The LDP calls for “head held high”

diplomacy, and Koizumi appears to believe that, despite criticisms by China and South Korea, visiting Yasukuni Shrine (where Class-A war criminals are enshrined) is what “head held high” diplomacy is about. As long as Koizumi holds his head high, East Asian Community creation remains problematic. The DPJ, on the other hand, has indicated its willingness to improve Japan’s relations with China and South Korea as its key agenda to “enlighten national interests.”

Of course the Japan-US alliance is also an important issue. The LDP calls for an unconditional Japan-US global partnership – which emphasizes the Japan-US alliance as the bedrock of Japan’s diplomacy. The DPJ, on the other hand, calls for a conditional Japan-US global partnership, which favors restraining the United States, if necessary.

The election ended with the big LDP victory. Yet the question of a conditional or unconditional Japan-US global partnership and the question of a proactive or half-hearted commitment to the creation of an East Asian Community remain central to defining not only the positions of the parties but determining the future of Japan as well. **JS**

– This is the last article of the series –

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