



Center for Strategic & International Studies
Washington, DC

Japan Chair Forum

Summary of "LDP-Liberal Coalition and Japan's Policy Direction"

Wednesday, January 27, 1999
4:00 p.m. – 5:30 p.m.
CSIS B-1 Conference Room (1800 K Street, NW)

Three panelists convened to discuss the implications of the recent coalition between the LDP and the Liberal Party. The general consensus among the speakers was that the formation of the LDP – Liberal Coalition (L-L Coalition) would add strength and stability to Japan's teetering political system. While the long term effects of the L-L Coalition remain to be seen, it was generally concluded that the L-L Coalition will enable policies to be enacted more quickly and speed up the legislation of the Security Guidelines. All three speakers however, remain somewhat skeptical about the L-L Coalition -- the static nature of the LDP and their survival tactics may override the momentum towards change and restructuring of the Japanese political system.

Tsuneo Watanabe, Japan Chair Visiting Research Scholar, CSIS

Tsuneo Watanabe opened the discussion by outlining the general nature of the L-L Coalition. The coalition was formed on January 15 and the Liberal Party's Secretary General Noda joined the cabinet as Minister of Home Affairs. In addition, the number of cabinets was consolidated from 20 to 18 by the request of the Liberal Party. Watanabe said the L-L Coalition will rejuvenate Japan's policy dynamics. This has already been demonstrated by the progression of the Security Guidelines debates. Furthermore, current discussion in the Diet has become more constructive and visible to the public compared to Japan's prior deliberations on security issues. Watanabe then turned to the issue of each party's incentive and interests where the L-L Coalition is concerned.

LDP

The LDP's incentive to enter the coalition is purely for its survival. As all three speakers strongly agreed, rather than clinging to an ideology or policy the LDP siphons its strength from its need to maintain the status quo and stay in power. The LDP suffered severe set backs last year and the only way to keep afloat is to cooperate with other parties and build a majority strong enough to dissolve the opposition's cooperation, such as a non-confidence vote. Watanabe believes that the new L-L Coalition will ensure the LDP's survival at least until the next party leader election if there is no economic turmoil.

Liberal Party

Watanabe noted two main incentives for the Liberal Party to join the L-L Coalition. First, the Liberal Party hopes this coalition will help their platform goals to be realized. The Liberal Party has rallied for small government and a more positive security role beyond existing constitutional

limitations. Led by party leader Ichiro Ozawa, the Liberal Party is strongly wedded to its ideologies and policies--something unusual in Japanese politics.

The second reason for the Liberal Party's entry into the coalition is one of party survival. The Liberal Party has many younger Diet members and without organizational support, they face difficulties in being reelected. In addition, after disbanding the New Frontier Party in 1997, the Liberal Party lost support from labor unions and the Sokagakkai, the largest religious group in Japan. At this point the Liberal Party needs the LDP's support at the local level. Lastly, Watanabe reiterated that he believes realizing the party policy is more important than its survival when analyzing why the Liberal Party joined this coalition.

Democratic Party--the opposition

Although this has been a difficult time for the Democratic Party, which was leading the opposition with Komeito, Watanabe suggested that this is an opportunity to distinguish its party from the L-L Coalition. However, the Democratic Party should be careful, Watanabe warned, not to fall back on old habits of theological and nonsense debates that distort the issues at hand and hold up the decision making process. The Democratic Party is aware of the public's shift in ideas, which is reflected by their acknowledgement of the Guidelines-related bills. They are however, asking for Diet approval.

Komeito

The Komeito generally enjoys a good relationship with the LDP. In addition, now that Komeito has a casting vote, both the LDP and Democratic Party will be much more apt to cooperate and give up some concessions (e.g. coupon vouchers).

As a peace oriented party the Komeito is naturally skeptical of the new guidelines and they are asking for diet approval before any troops are deployed. Komeito however, is aware of the shift in public opinion--that is, Japanese citizens are no longer "allergic" to talk of security issues and national defense during times of crisis. Watanabe recognizes the U.S. and Japanese government's concern about this negative veto power in the Japanese Diet on the Guidelines-related bills, but he points out that Japanese public opinion and opposition are now realistic enough not to block the Guideline bills which are crucial for Japanese security.

Wake-Up to Realism

Watanabe pointed out that Japan seems to be moving from "commercial Liberalism to reluctant realism." The DPRK's missile test was a good "wake-up-call" in making the public realize the importance of pursuing a security policy. When people go to the polls this time, they will likely be voting on issues such as the Constitution and security, which will in turn pave the way for policy voting versus party voting.

Watanabe believes that the coalition may lead to more constructive talks with the opposition while listening more carefully to public opinion. In the short term the L-L Coalition will help to speed up the Guidelines debates and legislation, and in the long run it will be an effective tool in restructuring the policy process--especially if the L-L Coalition wins the ban on bureaucrats answering in the diet. The largest hurdle for the L-L Coalition Watanabe says, will be economic recovery. For the time being the Obuchi Cabinet has regained some clout and stability but for the next election, the LDP will need a more appealing leader.

Mike Green, Olin Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations

Mike Green addressed the impact of the L-L Coalition on U.S.-Japan relations. Green stated that the Coalition is a good thing for U.S.-Japan relations--anything that means stability for Japan or initiates a pattern of stability in Japan is helpful to U.S.-Japan relations.

Stability

The L-L Coalition means greater stability for Japan because it has a strong support in the government. Also, cooperation among parties means deliberations will move more quickly with fewer glitches. Ozawa has already endorsed the LDP budget, which is an encouraging sign.

Guidelines

The L-L Coalition is also a positive force in Guidelines deliberations. The LDP and Liberal Party seem eager to come up with a strategy and present it to the United States. This is exemplified by the upcoming visits of Ozawa and Obuchi in March and May respectively.

The coalition however, is very complicated and has many problems that concern strategists like Green. Ozawa is tinkering with the guidelines, Green says, and he also wants to link the Guidelines with UN resolutions. Furthermore, an issue upon which the Liberal Party is still divided, Ozawa wants Diet approval in the Guidelines with the ability to vote no. When and if the Guidelines pass, it is optimal, Green notes, that it passes with little opposition in order to maintain a stable and balanced government.

Economics

Economically, Green says, the L-L Coalition makes it easier for Clinton and the USTR to criticize Japanese trade policies because they are dealing with a more stable partner.

Political Trends

With the L-L Coalition we are seeing a split emerge even more clearly than before in the LDP. It is a divide between mainstream and non-mainstream members--reminiscent of Japan's government during the 1950s. Green feels this ideological split is healthy and will pave the way for more constructive arguments and the emergence of new ideas.

Takashi Oka, Former advisor to Ichiro Ozawa and Journalist for the Christian Science Monitor

Our last speaker, Takashi Oka, spoke primarily about Ozawa and the ideas that motivate his policies. Portraying him as a man with a vision that did not sway by the ebb and flow of his political career, Oka quickly distinguished Ozawa from the traditional old-school LDP members. Unlike most LDP members, Ozawa's goal is not to promote his upward mobility. Instead, he sees the L-L Coalition as a way to increase smaller parties' power--a way to put his policies into action. Strongly wed to his ideology, Ozawa thinks the government will eventually come around to his way of thinking. Oka even goes as far to say that Ozawa envisions a kind of revolution--an overhauling of the Japanese political and economic system.

In terms of the U.S.-Japan Guidelines, Oka says that Ozawa is adamant about UN approval. Ozawa believes that Japan should be authorized to deploy troops by the UN Security Council.

Though he realizes this may be time consuming Ozawa feels it is necessary in order for Japan to operate appropriately in the international community. Oka commends Ozawa for adhering to his policies despite changes in public sentiment.

Question and Answer

1) Are Ozawa's steps leading to a collapse of the LDP?

- Green: Yes. If all of his policies are implemented – especially his proposal to decrease the number of ministers, then it is likely.
- Watanabe: I agree. If the LDP loses more seats they will lose the majority and the party will crumble.
- Oka: Ozawa himself thinks it is inevitable.

2) Since 1993 it has been “parties in search of policy.” Will voters ever have two choices between policies instead of politicians?

- Watanabe: It is already starting a little.
- Green: It depends on the issue. In terms of economics most likely not, but in the case of security I would say maybe.

3) What are Mr. Watanabe's comments on Ozawa's position? Should he show more leadership and take a greater role in government?

- Ozawa has never shown interest in becoming a minister and it takes a great deal of time to be a minister. Also, Ozawa wants to be able to negotiate with other parties. It is looking like somebody such as Mr. Noda who would be a good candidate for public appeal.

4) How does Ozawa stand on collective self-defense? Would he like to get rid of the ban on it?

- Oka: Ozawa does not want an expanded interpretation of the right of collective self-defense. He believes in collective security. At the time of the Gulf War he decided that the UN should be the vehicle to getting involved in international conflict.

5) Ozawa says he stands behind the Guidelines but he seems to make things difficult with the bills in government right now. Will he succeed in passing the Guidelines?

- Oka: Ozawa feels very strongly about the UN clause and it doesn't appear that he will compromise on that issue.
- Green: He seems to be taking a big risk.

6) Are we just seeing “Band-Aid” policies since the Obuchi cabinet has been installed?

- Green: Yes.
- Oka: We are seeing no policy difference between Hashimoto and Obuchi, therefore we are getting the message that the LDP does not even have the vitality to get someone new.