

September 23, 2005

Koizumi's victory—good or bad for Washington?

Yuki Tatsumi, Adjunct Fellow, International Security Program

On September 11, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi exceeded the world's expectation by carrying the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to the second largest election victory in the party's history.

The Japanese media is already reporting on Washington's favorable response to the election results. US government officials have reportedly made comments that reflect the Bush administrations' sense of relief. Despite the Bush administration's claims to avoid taking sides in what essentially are Japan's domestic affairs, it was a well-known fact that Washington was more than wary of the prospect of a victory by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). After all, the Administration's reservation about a DPJ-led government was understandable given the DPJ's campaign pledge to withdraw the Self-Defense Forces from Iraq, as well as its posture of placing greater importance on Japan's relations with Asia rather than the United States.

Now that Koizumi has won, there is great anticipation in Washington that he is now well-positioned not only to execute his reform agenda beyond postal privatization. The United States also anticipates that Japan under Koizumi's leadership will make good progress on a range of bilateral issues, from resumption of American beef exports to Japan to the realignment of US forces in Japan. With such a commanding majority in the House of Representatives (the LDP now has 296 out of 480 seats in the chamber), Koizumi can, in theory, accomplish what Washington hopes for. In reality, though, Koizumi's victory will most likely turn out to be a mixed blessing for Washington.

The weekend's election, for better or for worse, was a national referendum on postal privatization. Such a single-issue campaign strategy worked brilliantly for Koizumi. Staying on message during the campaign, for one, enabled Koizumi to shut the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) almost completely out of campaign debate. By framing the election as a face-off with the old guard LDP, Koizumi successfully convinced voters that he deserves another chance.

Given a renewed mandate, Koizumi's immediate attention will be to pass the postal reform bill immediately. What remains uncertain, though, is whether Koizumi will champion other policy issues once he accomplishes his goal of passing the postal reform bill. The problem is that many policy issues, particularly concerning foreign and security policies, require strong political will to either resolve or make significant progress.

In fact, there are several foreign/security policy issues that require Koizumi's immediate attention. For instance, the outcome of bilateral negotiations over the realignment of US forces in Japan will greatly impact the long-term health of the US-Japan alliance. These negotiations, however, have been dragging on without tangible result since 2003. Government officials on both sides frequently mention that the negotiation has reached a point at which no major progress can be made without strong political leadership. Koizumi should now lend his weight to making progress on the realignment of US forces in Japan.

Now that the Japanese government has decided to renew the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law for another year, the extension of the deployment of Japan Ground Self-Defense Forces (JGSDF) to Iraq is looming as another important decision that need to be made soon. While an absolute majority of the ruling

coalition in the Lower House theoretically makes it easier for Koizumi to extend the JGSDF deployment, the prospect of the extension remains unclear.

Another issue that is relevant not only for the future of the US-Japan alliance but also for Japan's security policy is the right of collective self-defense. Ultimately, whether Japan can grow into a US ally that has a more robust security policy depends on the outcome of the debate over this issue. Despite a great degree of anticipation that Koizumi may pave the way to revising Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, the Diet has not even begun to discuss the constitutional revision. With constitutional revision being a non-issue during the recent election campaign, how much effort (if any) Koizumi is willing to put into this issue is simply unknown.

In addition to these security policy issues, Koizumi faces diplomatic challenges in Japan's immediate neighborhood. For instance, Japan has not been able to participate in the Six-Party Talks from a position of strength for some time due to its overemphasis on the abduction issue. While the LDP pledged in its manifesto to improve Japan's relations with the Republic of Korea and the People's Republic of China, Koizumi has not articulated his strategy to that end. In fact, another Koizumi visit to Yasukuni Shrine is all that it would take to accelerate the downward spiral in Japan's relations with these countries. As this author has argued in the past, while Koizumi's strong support for the US-Japan alliance and commitment to stand by the Bush administration's policy must be appreciated, it remains questionable whether a Japan that is isolated from its neighbors will be an effective regional ally for Washington.

In recent days, Koizumi has already begun to duck these questions by hinting that some of these issues need to be resolved by his successor(s). With so many policy questions unanswered, only time will tell whether Koizumi's landslide victory was a temporary relief for Washington or a real beginning of a new relationship with Japan.

Yuki Tatsumi concurrently serves as Research Fellow for East Asia Program at The Henry L. Stimson Center.

For comments or inquiries on Japan Watch, please contact Eri Hirano at (202) 775-3144 or by e-mail at ehirano@csis.org.

Japan Watch is published by the Office of the Japan Chair of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary.

CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).

© 2005 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies.