

## JAPAN CHAIR PLATFORM

October 22, 2012

**Shinzo Abe Gets a Second Chance: What Is in Store for Him?**

Yuki Tatsumi

On September 26, 2012, Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) chose former prime minister Shinzo Abe to succeed Sadakazu Tanigaki as its leader. Abe, who stepped down from the premiership in the summer of 2007 following a loss in the Upper House election and his own illness, got a second chance to lead the LDP.

The party Abe inherits is adrift after three years in the opposition. The LDP lost power to the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) in 2009 after the voters became fed up with its continuing failure to revitalize the Japanese economy, a lack of transparency driven by back-door factional politics, and the lack of a clear vision for Japan's future. Abe's predecessor, Tanigaki, was not able to convince Japanese voters that the LDP was revitalizing itself as a reliable political party to which they could entrust the government. In addition, Abe finds himself in a very different position than when he first served as the LDP leader. In 2006 when Abe was elected to succeed Junichiro Koizumi, he was considered one of the rising stars in the LDP. This time around, Abe is no longer considered a rising star. Rather, it appears a considerable number of LDP members—as demonstrated by the support Shigeru Ishiba received from local party members in the LDP leadership race—think the party should choose someone who has never served in the position before. Among the five candidates that ran to succeed Tanigaki, no one received the majority vote in the first round. Ishiba received the most votes (194), followed by Abe (141), Nobuteru Ishihara (96), Nobutaka Machimura (34), and Yoshimasa Hayashi (27). What is notable is the overwhelming support for Ishiba from the local LDP headquarters. Ishiba won 165 out of 300 votes, with Abe trailing far behind him at 87 votes. However, support from the LDP Diet members—Abe won 54 out of 197 votes compared to Ishiba who won only 34 votes—enabled Abe to advance and face Ishiba in a runoff where only LDP Diet members could vote. Abe then prevailed by a margin of 108 to 89.

Moving forward, Abe will have to demonstrate that he learned from his mistakes the first time around. For instance, Abe was criticized for excessive favoritism toward those with whom he enjoyed close personal ties, regardless of their capacity, so much so that his cabinet was often ridiculed in the media as *otomodachi naikaku* (classmate cabinet). He needs to prove that as a more mature politician he is capable of offering senior party positions to those who are not his supporters, thereby achieving party cohesion. Eventually, he must be able to offer a credible scenario to force an election against the Noda cabinet, which would amount to a referendum on the DPJ's three years as ruling party.

To Japanese voters, Abe needs to demonstrate that the LDP under his leadership can offer a vision for Japan that resonates with them in concrete ways. When he was last prime minister, his core theme "*utsukushii kuni* (beautiful country)" confused many voters, as this slogan was associated with legislative efforts to officially designate the national anthem and national flag, which had very little to do with the economic revitalization the voters were most interested in seeing. Since Abe resigned in 2007, Japan has grown further inward looking, leaving more voters feeling anxious about their future. Abe needs to pull the LDP together and offer a prescription for Japan that inspires voters to become optimistic about their future. From pension reform to national debt to economic recovery, Abe must present the voters with credible policy alternatives.

In the area of foreign and national security policy, Abe's reemergence comes at a time when Japan's relations with China and Korea are much worse than when he was prime minister. Many Japanese citizens feel themselves vulnerable in the security situation in East Asia. A public opinion poll conducted by the Japanese government on defense issues in January 2012 is telling: compared to the same poll taken in January 2009, the Japanese public is much more inclined to

identify regional security issues, such as the situation on the Korean peninsula and China's military modernization, as the source of security concerns.<sup>1</sup>

Abe's reputation as a conservative is already inviting negative reaction from China and Korea. His visit to Yasukuni Shrine on October 17 aggravated their concerns. It is imperative that Abe sends a signal to Beijing and Seoul that if the LDP takes back the government under his leadership, Japan may be firm in its stance on territorial issues and questions of national sovereignty but willing to engage in dialogue on specific measures to prevent an escalation of tensions. To the United States, Abe needs to prove that he can deliver on his promises. None of the three DPJ prime ministers has been able to deliver on the promises they made on important issues in U.S.-Japan relations, such as Japan's potential participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) or the relocation of Marine Corps Air Station Futenma on Okinawa. Abe has to convince the United States that Japan under his leadership would be able to honor the commitments it makes.

So far, Abe seems to be taking all the right steps. His appointment of Shigeru Ishiba to the position of LDP secretary-general is a sign of inclusiveness. Abe's effort to reach out to China and Korea when he became prime minister in 2006—he broke from precedent and chose Beijing and Seoul as the destinations for his first overseas trips—should be regarded as an encouraging sign that his conservatism would not necessarily prevent him from pursuing a pragmatic approach in Japan's relations with China and Korea. His appointment of Masahiko Koumura, a foreign policy moderate who previously served as foreign and defense minister, as the party's vice president is also encouraging. In fact, as a conservative who does not have to prove his patriotism or his commitment to national defense, Abe may be better positioned to improve Tokyo's strained relationships with Beijing and Seoul. And Abe's ideological alignment with his late grandfather Nobusuke Kishi, who laid the foundation for the U.S.-Japan alliance by signing the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security in 1960, should afford him time and space to address his priorities with Washington.

But none of this will materialize as long as the LDP remains in opposition. Ultimately, Abe's second chance as the LDP leader will be judged on whether he was successful in leading the LDP back into the government. That will require concrete policy prescriptions on economic, foreign policy, and defense issues that demonstrate he has a clear vision for the future of Japan so that the voters can better understand how Abe intends to lead the country. His road toward that end has only begun.

*Yuki Tatsumi is a senior associate of the East Asia Program at the Henry L. Stimson Center in Washington, D.C.*

---

***Japan Chair Platform* is published by the Office of the Japan Chair at 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).**

**© 2012 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.**

---

<sup>1</sup> “Outline of ‘Public Opinion Survey on the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) and Defense Issues,’” Cabinet Office of Japan, March 2012, [http://www.mod.go.jp/e/d\\_act/others/pdf/public\\_opinion.pdf](http://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/others/pdf/public_opinion.pdf).