



# POST-ELECTION JAPAN: PM ABE LIKELY TO BE FIRM BUT FLEXIBLE ON SENKAKU

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*The LDP won a landslide in Japan's Lower House elections on December 16. Shinzo Abe will be appointed prime minister later this month. With the election campaign over, it's time for Abe to act and implement the LDP's election promises. If some of the measures he has suggested during the election campaign are implemented, especially those on the contentious Senkaku/Diaoyu issue, it will have repercussions that both Japan and its neighbors have reasons to fear. However, Abe's tough talk during the election campaign was largely meant for domestic consumption. It is likely that Abe as new prime minister will be firm but flexible on the Senkaku issue.*

The Lower House elections in Japan on December 16 ended in gloom for the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). After a bit more than three years at the pinnacle of political power, the DPJ has to step down. In the 2009 election it secured a landslide, winning 308 seats, but this time captured only 57. The reverse was seen for the main opposition party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). In 2009, it was solidly rejected by voters. Capturing only 119 seats, it was a resounding defeat for the party that had ruled Japan almost single-handedly since its foundation in 1955. On Dec. 16, winning 294 seats, the LDP's comeback was astounding. Together with its companion from the pre-2009 days, the New Komeito that got 31 seats, it secured a two-thirds majority in the Lower House. The two parties will once again form the government and the LDP's leader, Shinzo Abe, will be appointed prime minister. It is a comeback also for Abe who served as premier for one year in 2006–7.

The elections this time resembled those in 2009 in that voters rejected the incumbent government. In 2009 it was the LDP that met the wrath of voters, on Sunday it was the DPJ. It seems that the leadership of the LDP has understood the voters' sentiments. In the immediate aftermath, the comments even of LDP leaders were somber. They noted that the election result was not so much an expression of enthusiasm for the LDP but a protest against the DPJ. On Radio Sweden morning news on Dec. 17, one of

the LDP's leaders, Yuriko Koike, told the reporter that her party had listened to the voters: "Under its years in opposition the LDP has changed a lot."

The change that Koike is keen to stress is presumably one whereby the LDP has listened to the voters and adjusted its policies so that they reflect voters' priorities. Given the resounding rejection of the LDP in the 2009 elections, this should come as no surprise. Anything else would be near suicide for any political party given the kind of voters' wrath witnessed in that election. But the problem is that the change that the LDP has undergone, as represented by Abe, is far from what the voters have been looking for. In a way similar to the previous time when he was a political hopeful and later became prime minister, he has launched a nationalistic agenda. During the election campaign, he has focused on a revision of the Peace Constitution, strengthening Japan's defense, and lashing out against China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu issue in a way that has inflamed relations.

It is hard to maintain that these issues that Abe has pounded in during the election campaign reflect the priorities of the Japanese in general. With an economy in doldrums, still not taking off after what is by now two "lost" decades, a pension system in shatters, mounting social security expenditures, a population development that is impressive only in the number of increasingly old people, etc., it's hard to claim that an agenda that is certain only in its ability to create tension in relations with neighbors is



what ordinary people are crying out for. No wonder, the voter turnout in Sunday's election, 59 percent, the lowest in the postwar period, signals a disinterest of the electorate to rush to the polling both.

The post-election comments and lack of the customary bragging indicates that at least Abe and his advisors are aware of the fact that they have not been given a *carte blanche* by voters to impose policies single-handedly. To win an election is one thing, to be in the government ruling the country is a different matter. Given Japan's economic malaise and strained relations with neighbors, it is likely that Abe will shelve at least some of his radical ideas. The matter most likely to be attended to first is the inflammatory Senkaku issue that continues to poison relations with China, something Japan can ill afford.

## Firm but Flexible?

For Abe as prime minister, the strained relations with China will loom large initially. Judged from his previous stint as Japan's premier (2006–2007), it seems likely that he will tread carefully, however strong his rhetoric as a candidate. Before he became prime minister in 2006, he was known as a hardliner, opting for a right-wing swing of Japanese politics. As premier he tried to implement his agenda but was not particularly successful. To the surprise of many, he demonstrated unexpected skills in handling relations with China. His predecessor Junichiro Koizumi had regularly visited the Yasukuni Shrine, causing Sino–Japanese relations to be at almost an all-time low at the time of his departure as premier. However, the week after Abe had been appointed, he was in Beijing and began the arduous task of repairing relations with Japan's towering neighbor, even agreeing with the Chinese leadership that Japan and China were joined in “a strategic and mutually beneficial partnership.” Similarly, in April 2007, he handled the sensitive Yasukuni issue in a

way that satisfied his supporters and gave no reason for the Chinese to protest.

Based on Abe's dealings with China when he was premier in 2006–2007, it can be expected that Japan's new prime minister will try to be firm but flexible when handling relations with China. When he takes office at the end of December, relations with China are an issue that he has to take by the bull's horns. There is reason to believe that he will do so in a way that defuses the explosive issue. There is a precedent. In 1978 when Japan and China had problems in advancing towards signing the peace and friendship treaty, Japan's then Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda was the one who acted and signed the treaty on behalf of Japan, to the utter consternation and anger of most fellow LDP politicians. Fukuda, however, saw signing the treaty to be in Japan's national interest. Post festum, he prided himself to be the only one who could have achieved the feat by his ability to neutralize the adversaries to the treaty in the LDP who by and large were assembled around him.

On the inflammatory Senkaku issue, a compromise has to be found. Abe's past career as an outspoken and hard-hitting nationalist is an asset when the rage felt by Japanese conservatives, nationalists and ultranationalists has to be subdued. As was the case with Fukuda back in 1978, no one could question his credentials as a nationalist. The same is the case with Abe. He can, if he chooses to do so, repeat Fukuda's feat.

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