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THE NEW PM SHOULD EXERCISE STRONG DIPLOMATIC LEADERSHIP

Hiroshi Hirabayashi

Yasuo Fukuda has abruptly resigned as prime minister of Japan. Japanese politics has plunged into uncertainty.

The new prime minister is scheduled to be picked on September 24, when a new president of the governing Liberal Democratic Party, to be elected by the party convention on September 22, is designated as prime minister by the Diet. After that, however, the general elections in the House of Representatives (Lower House) are expected to take place sooner or later. If the Democratic Party of Japan, a rival of the LDP, wins, its president, Mr. Ichiro Ozawa will replace the newly nominated successor to Mr. Fukuda.

The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.

I have felt through my diplomatic career that, with some exceptions, post-Nakasone prime ministers of Japan rarely have deployed willingness or capacity to take a strong leadership role of their own in foreign affairs. The present is an era of summit diplomacy by top leaders. The future prime minister of Japan, whoever he or she may be, should exercise strong leadership in diplomacy.

Diplomatic leadership consists of substance as well as communication and public relations (PR). Substance refers to the planning and execution of foreign policies. The prime minister must have clear understanding of major diplomatic issues and a deep knowledge of history, geography and international relations. Ideally, the prime minister should have diplomatic philosophy and ideals that he or she wants to appeal and realize for the international community as well as for the Japanese people. Furthermore the prime minister should have an exceptional patriotic spirit and the guts to promote national interests. The prime minister should also have the willingness and courage to engage oneself in major problems of diplomatic importance and to mediate internationally, if necessary.

As for the communication and PR aspect of diplomatic leadership, the prime minister must more openly and candidly speak out, both at home and abroad. He or she should explain and try in earnest to persuade the domestic and international audience. Skills are necessary, but in Japanese PM's case particularly, the guts and willingness to communicate are the prerequisites. In addition to the substance of messages, personality and performance determine the PM's power to communicate.

The prime minister has to pay the utmost attention to the choice of his/her foreign policy advisory group as well. The prime minister should select such foreign minister, chief cabinet secretary and other assistants who are prepared to sacrifice themselves for their leader with deep insight and the courage to offer frank and even bitter advice.

Armed with above-mentioned quality and determination, the prime minister of Japan must attack the following top priority agenda with strong leadership:

1. The prime minister should exercise leadership in having Japan carry out international responsibilities as a major power. The top priority of today is the continued engagement of the Maritime Self-Defense Force in the refueling mission in the Indian Ocean, which is part of the international efforts to fight terrorism. This mission also contributes to a global campaign against piracy, to which Japanese vessels often fall victim as well. It would be desirable for Japan to newly dispatch SDF troops to Afghanistan, even if their mission would be limited to the provision of logistical support. Unfortunately, however, this will not be realized anytime soon, given the existing legal framework that imposes constraints on the dispatch and operations of the SDF in a war torn country such as Afghanistan and the Japanese public's strong aversion to human costs.

We have to recall the humiliation we suffered after the first Gulf War in early the 1990s. At that time, Japan, even by enacting a special tax law, offered an enormous financial contribution amounting to US\$13 billion to the coalition against Iraq. And yet, because of the absence of Japanese nationals engaged in the war and other risky operations, Japan was excluded from the list of countries to which the Kuwaiti government expressed gratitude as contributors to its liberation from Iraq in newspaper ads in the United States.


If Japan drops out of the fight against terrorism by leaving the Indian Ocean without any alternative engagement, it will surely be criticized as a country that sheds no sweat, let alone blood, even for a lofty international cause. This would reduce Japan's credit as an aspirant to the permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council. Japanese citizens traveling and working abroad would feel ashamed. If, to the contrary, the prime minister appeals from the heart for the refueling mission, he or she will win public support in spite of resistance from political opponents. After all, the Japanese people are wise enough to understand, if earnestly and correctly informed.

2. The new prime minister should exercise leadership to rejuvenate the
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Japan-US alliance in cooperation with an incoming new US administration. Many Japanese and Americans are frustrated with Japan being described as “Japan Nothing.” What is needed first is the settlement of the long-pending relocation of the US Marine Corps’ Futenma Air Base in Okinawa and the transfer of US marines in Okinawa to Guam. The prime minister must take the lead in making dynamic and sincere efforts to persuade the authorities and people of Okinawa who are reluctant or opposed to the proposals agreed upon by the two governments.

3. The new prime minister will hopefully refrain from visiting Yasukuni Shrine so as not to allow this issue to come in the way of what the two governments have named “mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests” between Japan and China. I very much honor and sympathize with those who want to pay homage to the war dead who sacrificed their lives for the nation and are enshrined at Yasukuni Shrine. And yet the prime minister had better set aside such personal feelings, at least while in office, for greater national interests. This does not mean Japan should refrain from asserting its positions before China and South Korea. This applies especially when it comes to the integrity of Japan’s territory and the exclusive economic zone belonging to Japan.

4. Russia’s high-handed policies both at home and abroad, recently on Georgia, seem to have developed a mini cold war with the West. The prime minister should call right what is right and wrong what is wrong about Russia’s behavior. Japan must continue asserting its legitimate claims for the reversion of the Russian-held four northern islands off Hokkaido. On the other hand, the prime minister might venture on the role of mediator between Russia and the West, given the fact that Russia, like China, needs Japan. Expressing what needs to be said while maintaining friendly relations with Russia is the surest way for Japan to be reckoned with by both Russia and the international community.

Finally, it goes without saying that PM's diplomatic leadership goes in tandem with the Japanese people's strong support to the prime minister. The prime minister should respond sincerely and expeditiously to the Japanese people's serious concerns with the economy and welfare. 

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