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Lame Duck Koizumi – What It Means for Washington

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With more than a full year in his tenure as the prime minister, Junichiro Koizumi is rapidly turning into a lame duck. The Postal Reform Bill—the bill in which Koizumi has invested almost all of his political capital—passed the House of Representatives by a margin of a mere five votes. Despite Koizumi's attempt to keep LDP members of the House in line by threatening to dissolve the Lower House or withdraw the party's endorsement in the next reelection campaign, more than thirty Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) members of the House voted against the bill.

The bill has now moved to the House of Councillors (Upper House), which opened debate on July 11. But the ultimate fate of the bill remains unclear. Running on a completely different election cycle, Koizumi has very little political leverage. It is unclear whether Mikio Aoki, a “guardian” of the Koizumi government who effectively leads the Upper House LDP members, can exert enough influence with his deteriorating health. And, it takes only eighteen “no” votes from LDP members of the Upper House to defeat the measure in the Upper House.

Since the Postal Reform Bill passed the Lower House, Koizumi has been openly hinting at the option of resigning and dissolving the Diet if the bill is voted down in the Upper House. Such a move will certainly trigger chaos in Japanese politics. The LDP does not yet have a successor to Koizumi who enjoys party-wide support. And the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) still does not seem able to convince voters that it is capable of governing the country. Even if the Postal Reform Bill narrowly passes, Koizumi's political capital will be mostly gone. This will leave Koizumi in a lame duck status with very little political leverage next year within his own party, let alone vis-à-vis opposition parties.

This predicament should be a major source of concern for Washington. Considering the Bush administration's ambitious plans for the US-Japan alliance, it is somewhat doubtful whether they can be achieved if Koizumi has anything less than a robust amount of political capital and determination at his disposal.

Take the ongoing Defense Posture Review Initiative (DPRI), for example. Negotiations over the realignment of US forces have been dragging despite the Department of Defense's earlier hope for the two sides to reach a provisional agreement by June this year. As one former US government official aptly suggested, it is impossible to resolve the issues related to a major US force realignment in a way that is satisfactory for everyone involved. With so many bases and facilities under discussion for realignment, the negotiations will soon reach a point at which political decisions at the highest level of the government will be required. By the time the issue reaches Koizumi's desk, however, he may be in no position to make the decisions that will be so critical for the future health of the US-Japan alliance. Worse yet, Koizumi just might push for a drastic plan for US troop withdrawal from Okinawa to regain his domestic political standing, in complete disregard of a long and difficult bilateral negotiation that has been ongoing at the working level.

The extension of the Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF) deployment to Iraq is also in the offing. It is said that the United States strongly hopes that Japan will extend the deployment period for the GSDF for another

year after the current period expires in December 2005. However, the extension of the GSDF deployment is guaranteed to be a fierce political battle, as the DPJ will likely to argue strongly against the extension. With his weak political standing within the Diet, it is doubtful whether Koizumi can successfully extend the GSDF deployment.

Furthermore, the issue of Japan's right of exercising collective self-defense still remains unresolved without much progress after four years. As some US government officials have reportedly suggested in the past, Japan's inability to exercise the right of collective self-defense has been a roadblock for the deeper alliance relationship that Washington ultimately desires. Meanwhile, as many Japanese government officials acknowledge, Japan has maxed out what it can do for the US-Japan alliance under the current constitutional framework. If Koizumi, who still is extremely popular compared to his predecessors, could not pave the way to get the constitutional reform debate on the political calendar, very few others can. And how Japan settles on the issue of collective self-defense will have a profound impact on Japan's future role within the US-Japan alliance.

Washington's concerns about Japan may not be strictly limited to alliance-related issues. Koizumi's tendency to rely on his popularity in lieu of political support in the Diet may make Koizumi behave contrary to Washington's wishes. With a majority of Japanese indicating that Koizumi should not discontinue visits to Yasukuni in response to pressure from Beijing or Seoul, Koizumi can continue to be stubborn on the Yasukuni issue, thereby further alienating mainland neighbors. Koizumi may be unwilling to adjust his position toward North Korea (the abduction issue in particular) for fear of being perceived as "soft" on North Korea by voters. Yet none of this can be good for Washington as it struggles to keep Beijing and Seoul on the same page at a critical juncture in the six-party talks with Pyongyang.

Of course, should the Upper House vote down the Postal Reform bill, we will be talking about a "post-Koizumi leadership in Japan" by this time next month. Even if the bill passes, however, Washington should be under no illusion of the potential damage to Koizumi's ability to deliver and how it may affect Washington's dealings with Tokyo for the remainder of his term.

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