

Losing Tokyo

Пише: Paul J. Saunders
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Sunday's elections in Nago, a small city on the Japanese island of Okinawa, have further complicated American efforts to move a U.S. Marine air station from Futenma to Nago – where the new mayor-elect strongly opposes the plan. Nevertheless, while the dispute over the base has become a major issue in America's relations with the new government of Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama, considerably greater challenges may loom ahead.

Mr. Hatoyama's Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) won a virtual landslide in 2009 parliamentary elections in part on the strength of his opposition to the base-relocation plan, negotiated in 2006 after years of talks, and his broader emphasis on redefining the Japan-U.S. relationship. His efforts to revise the deal – either by consolidating the base with another American facility or moving it out of Japan entirely – create huge (and potentially expensive) problems for the Pentagon, which had incorporated the base plan into its wider strategic calculus in East Asia. Prime Minister Hatoyama has promised to complete a policy review by May.

What is most striking from outside Japan is the new government's apparent failure to think through the base issue in advance, which in turn placed Mr. Hatoyama in the position of rejecting a deal signed with one of Tokyo's closest allies without having a well-developed alternative proposal. Unfortunately, conversations with Japanese analysts, businesspeople, and even some working-level government officials suggest that this weak policy process may not be limited to the Futenma base matter.

Unlike the United States, where political appointees in major government departments can often be counted in the dozens, Japan's government bureaucracy includes only a handful of political positions in each of its ministries – a system structurally biased to establish a stronger bureaucracy and a weaker political leadership relative to America's, where the larger number of appointees gives political leaders greater access to information inside the system and to bureaucratic processes, such as producing recommendations or options for top leaders.

This is no doubt a key challenge to the DPJ government – particularly because Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) held power for so long and had an opportunity to build enduring

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relationships with key bureaucrats. Rather than building relationships, however, by all accounts Mr. Hatoyama's government distrusts its bureaucracy and is keeping tight control of policymaking within its handful of senior officials in each agency, leading in turn to complaints from lower-level officials and key constituencies outside government that they no longer have a role in the policy process and often do not even know what to expect.

It may well be legitimate for DPJ leaders to fear that bureaucrats sympathetic to the LDP could undermine their efforts to put their own stamp on Japan's national policy, both domestically and abroad. However, taking into account the DPJ's limited experience governing, its weak bench of veteran officials, and the small number of appointees in each agency, trying to shut out the bureaucracy could also be a very risky course, leaving the government to take major decisions without much input from professionals (whatever their political loyalties).

This could have implications that extend well beyond U.S. military bases in Japan. In one other foreign-policy example, DPJ leader Ichiro Ozawa appears determined to cultivate Beijing, leading a 645-member delegation there and creating a minor scandal by pressing Japan's imperial household to arrange a meeting between Emperor Akihito and China's visiting vice president on unusually short notice. While the United States should generally welcome warmer ties between Tokyo and Beijing, Mr. Ozawa's strategic rationale and goals are not fully clear.

From an American perspective, it is of course up to the Japanese people to elect their leaders and to Japan's leaders, of whatever party, to decide their national priorities based on a combination of voters' preferences and their own judgments. In view of the vital national security interests at stake in East Asia and our longstanding alliance, now celebrating its fiftieth anniversary, the United States must engage deeply with Japan's new government on Futenma and other regional security issues, including China, North Korea, and Russia among many others. But judging from Japan's emerging policy process, Washington should prepare for a rocky road ahead.