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8 Japan's Way Forward: The Prospects for Political Leadership and the International Implications

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THE SUCCESS THAT Shinzo Abe had after his 2012 election in breaking Japan's pattern of one-year premierships offered hope to some that a new era of effective political leadership was at hand for the country. However, it appears that any respite from Japan's "leadership deficit" will be temporary. As the authors of this volume argue, there are bound to be exceptions to the parade of short-lived prime ministers who struggle to advance their agendas—strong premiers such as Yasuhiro Nakasone, Junichiro Koizumi, and Abe are likely to emerge from time to time—but without further changes to the political system, powerful institutional factors will continue to make it difficult for prime ministers to exercise political leadership in a sustained and effective manner.

Of course, Japan has never been renowned for having charismatic, strong political leaders. However, the challenges associated with political leadership are particularly worrying now because over the past quarter century, societal shifts, political reform, and voter expectations have elevated the profile of Japan's prime minister, making the individual holding that post and the performance of that person increasingly consequential. Furthermore, in recent decades, the rise of summit diplomacy

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and advances in communications technology have expanded the diplomatic role of heads of government. As a result, a return to the pattern of weak, short-lived prime ministers seems destined to complicate efforts to cope with the daunting economic and demographic challenges facing the country, and it would have important ramifications for Japan's external relations and for how foreign policymakers around the world should think about relations with Japan.

WHY DOES WEAK POLITICAL LEADERSHIP CONTINUE TO BE A PROBLEM?

As the analysis in the preceding chapters makes clear, the electoral reforms of the 1990s offer an object lesson in the risks of unintended consequences. Reform proponents argued that the introduction of single-seat constituencies in the Lower House would increase party competition, make politics more issue oriented, and reduce political corruption. This, in turn, should have paved the way for more effective political leadership. But things did not turn out as planned.

Of course, the overhaul of the electoral system has accomplished some of what it was meant to do. It increased party competition and helped to erode the utility of party factions. That, together with campaign finance reform, has played a part in reducing the sway that money politics has over the Japanese system. Also, as Harukata Takenaka explains, it has helped shift Japan's parliament away from the type of consensus model that is best suited to a multiparty system and closer to a Westminster model in which the prime minister and his cabinet have greater clout in the legislative process. Meanwhile, the administrative reforms passed a few years later, in 1996, did indeed help to strengthen the hand of the prime minister to some degree.

Yet, when taken together, it is clear that these reforms have not yet sufficed to create to a system that consistently nurtures effective political leadership. This is because the prime minister still faces numerous veto points that can hobble his agenda. Plus, a new political dynamic has emerged that makes it even harder for the prime minister to sustain his political capital.

Most notably, the shift toward a system in which power is more likely to alternate between parties has increased the likelihood of twisted Diets, where the different chambers of parliament are controlled by rival parties. Importantly, the Lower House only prevails over the Upper House

in a handful of situations; otherwise, the Upper House is surprisingly powerful, at least compared with the UK House of Lords or upper houses in other bicameral parliamentary systems. When combined with the increased likelihood that the Upper House may fall into the hands of the opposition—thanks to electoral reform as well as shifts in voting behavior—the power that the Upper House has to derail the prime minister's agenda has made it even more likely that the prime minister's legislative initiatives will run aground. In fact, both the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) quickly learned during their time in the opposition how to exploit the twisted Diet's propensity for legislative gridlock in order to block the ruling party's agenda and thus set themselves up for victory in the next election.

The cabinet also continues to have remarkably little direct control over the legislative process. As Takenaka explains, the administrative reforms of the 1990s gave the prime minister and his Cabinet Secretariat greater authority to initiate policy. However, unlike in the British system, the legislative agenda and parliamentary order are all determined by Diet committees rather than the cabinet, leaving the prime minister with few formal powers to advance his legislative priorities. This becomes a problem when the prime minister and other leaders in the ruling party, many of whom are rivals, have diverging opinions.

These challenges are intrinsically linked to the difficulties prime ministers have had in managing politics in their own parties. In their chapters, Takao Ochi and Yuka Uchida Ando describe how intraparty rivalries have stymied decision making in both the LDP and the DPJ. With the decline of money politics and an absence of strong ideological leanings or societal cleavages to motivate party members, there is little to inspire party loyalty among politicians other than their party's capacity to help members be reelected and get appointed to influential posts. As campaigns have become increasingly nationalized, the influence of party leaders seems to depend more and more on their individual popularity and the degree to which this can rub off on their fellow candidates at election time. It is no coincidence that since the electoral reforms went into effect, Japan has seen one wave of "children" after another—the "Koizumi children" who rode Junichiro Koizumi's coattails into the Diet, the "Ozawa children" who powered the DPJ's ascent, and the "Abe children" who heralded the return to power of the LDP in 2012. These waves of new faces elected thanks to their association with other popular politicians have been one sign of how much personal popularity has become a driving force in Japanese politics.

But popularity is fickle and, as Ochi notes, public support for politicians has become much more volatile. Public polling now fluctuates more wildly month to month than before, and cabinet support ratings now tend to start out higher and decline more precipitously after a new prime minister's first few months in office. This has contributed to the emergence of a sort of "polling politics," in which excessive significance is placed on the frequent polls measuring cabinet support. Party members are reluctant to show any opposition to a party leader when the leader is riding high in these polls, but are quick to turn against that person once the support ratings drop below a certain level.

Paradoxically, the growing prominence of the prime minister has helped create an expectations trap that can undermine his power. Yuichi Hosoya explains how there has been a "presidentialization" of the premiership, at least to the extent that the Japanese public now sees the prime minister as the face of the ruling party and has higher expectations that he be a strong leader. As with any job, though, heads of government need time to learn how to effectively wield power and, especially in the Japanese system, they gain credibility by staying in power long enough that those who might otherwise undermine their authority realize they cannot outlast them. However, a vicious cycle has emerged in which public expectations are quickly dashed and new prime ministers find their support dropping before they can start to make good on their promises. As polling politics take hold, waning support makes it progressively harder for premiers to advance their agenda, fueling further declines in public support.

When he returned to power in 2012, Prime Minister Abe was acutely aware of the importance of properly managing the new polling politics and, in the first two years of his administration, he and Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga did a masterful job of handling public sentiment and keeping the ruling party unified. But Abe was helped considerably by the convergence of a number of factors: utter frustration among voters with the opposition DPJ; the fortuitous timing of an Upper House election just seven months after he took office, while he was still riding high; and a lack of credible opponents. Despite Abe's success, the limited formal powers designated to the prime minister's office means that the bar still remains high for Japanese prime ministers. They operate with little margin for error, needing to combine exceptional political skills with extraordinarily good timing and good fortune in order to be able to stay in office long enough to develop into effective leaders.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR JAPANESE FOREIGN POLICY?

The probability that strong political leadership will remain elusive in Japan has important implications not only for the Japanese public but also for the rest of the world. From 2006 to 2012, when premiers rotated through the office on an annual basis, Japan's allies and partners often became frustrated with the futility of working with leaders who seemed unlikely to stay in power long enough to deliver on their promises or to credibly make bold foreign policy commitments. These frustrations can be expected to return when the pattern of prime ministerial weakness reasserts itself. In particular, there are five trends in Japanese foreign policy behavior that are likely to become more pronounced if Japan continues to struggle with weak political leadership.

Continuity in foreign policy strategy: It may seem counterintuitive, but a return to the pattern of frequently rotating prime ministers makes it more likely that there will be a great deal of continuity in Japan's foreign policy on top-tier issues, and that the overall contours of Japan's grand strategy, at least to the degree that it can be said to have one, will remain the same. Foreign policy change in postwar Japan has almost always been incremental, and major foreign policy initiatives have typically only occurred under strong prime ministers. It took Eisaku Sato, Japan's longest-serving postwar prime minister, to secretly negotiate the reversion of Okinawa; Nakasone was responsible for some of the most consequential efforts to strengthen US-Japan security relations; and Koizumi made his surprise visit to North Korea after almost a year and a half in office, while he was still as popular in the polls as any other prime minister in the previous decade. When they are weak and have only been in office for a short time, though, premiers have found it perilous to try to buck precedence in foreign relations.

This is even more likely in the current political climate. The foreign policy failures that helped bring down Yukio Hatoyama should only reinforce the reluctance felt by Japanese prime ministers who lack firm support about charting a new diplomatic course. Meanwhile, the fact that Japan will almost certainly continue to be ruled by coalition governments provides further incentives for continuity. The current electoral system and rules governing the legislative process make it important for the party with the majority of seats to align itself with smaller coalition partners, and the need to reach consensus within the ruling coalition

for major moves makes dramatic foreign policy shifts more unlikely than they might otherwise be.

Another important factor reinforcing the tendency toward continuity is the post–Cold War emergence of a rough nonpartisan consensus among Japan's policy elite about its broad foreign policy strategy. Practically all mainstream figures in the ruling and opposition parties feel, to some degree or another, that maintaining the US-Japan alliance needs to be a top priority for Japan, that it is important to make an effort to balance China's rise even while ensuring that Sino-Japanese relations do not become too tense, and that Japan needs to strengthen ties with other Asian countries that are concerned about Chinese dominance.[1] Leaders may differ in terms of their rhetoric, the degree to which they prioritize these objectives, and the ways in which they pursue them, but when all is said and done, consistency rather than change is bound to be the rule in terms of the overarching direction of Japanese foreign policy. And when change occurs, it is likely to be incremental, driven more by exogenous factors than by a proactive prime minister.

More frequent diplomatic crises: While it is hard to envision any radical departures in Japan's overall foreign policy approaches, a return to the frequent rotation of prime ministers is likely to invite greater volatility in the country's relations with its neighbors. This is because heads of government who have only been in office for a short period of time tend to lack sufficient experience in crisis management. Plus, they normally have not had the opportunity to build the types of personal relationships with other world leaders that can be leveraged to head off misunderstandings and deescalate crises.

There is little outside of actual experience that can fully prepare prime ministers to balance the complex considerations that come into play in international crises, and leaders find it particularly difficult to identify wise counsel and avoid being carried away by the momentum of events when crises flare up early in their terms. American history offers a classic example of the difference that experience on the job can make. Less than three months after taking office, President John F. Kennedy gave the final go-ahead to a CIA plan to support the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, which quickly turned into a fiasco. A year and a half later, though, when he faced the Cuban Missile Crisis, a more seasoned Kennedy had the confidence and wisdom to critically evaluate the recommendations he was getting from his advisors, resist pressure from those urging rash measures, and deftly manage the situation. Few Japanese prime ministers

have the luxury of lasting in office that long, though—only 2 of the last 10 managed to stay in power as long as Kennedy had by the time of the missile crisis. Accordingly, it is difficult for them to develop the type of judgement that is essential in such crises.

The 2010 and 2012 flare-ups with China over the Senkaku Islands give a taste of the types of crises that are likely to occur more frequently if the pattern of weak leadership returns. In addition to inexperience and a lack of personal channels between Japanese and Chinese leaders, a sense of domestic vulnerability also limited the Japanese prime ministers' room to maneuver in responding to each of these crises. For instance, if he was stronger politically, Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda might have been able to find ways to outflank or quietly pressure Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara in spring 2012 to head off his inflammatory bid to purchase two of the Senkaku Islands, or at least he could have leaned more heavily on the islands' owner not to go ahead with the sale. However, by that time the Noda cabinet's support ratings were hovering close to 20 percent, the point of no return in Japanese politics. Widely perceived as a lame duck, there was little political capital that Noda could muster to keep matters from coming to a head. Meanwhile, Chinese leaders had little incentive to compromise with a prime minister who everybody knew would soon be out of office.

More appeals to populism: Third, with the weakening of party institutions, the rise of polling politics, and changes in the media, more opportunities have emerged for ambitious politicians to strengthen their hand by appealing directly to public sentiment. The way has already been paved by successful prime ministers such as Koizumi, who made a habit of forgoing normal party mechanisms and instead orchestrating political drama to rally the public behind his agenda, and Abe, who initially rose to prominence by championing the issue of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea. Now, a return to political instability and weak political leadership at the top is likely to make it even more tempting for political leaders to resort to demagoguery, and the absence of strong political leaders who might otherwise pressure them to tone down their rhetoric gives them license to proceed.

This dynamic is particularly worrying in terms of Japan's relations with China, as well as with Korea. Given the extent to which public opinion in Japan has turned against both of those countries, more populist—and occasionally nationalistic—stances on regional relations can provide an appealing vehicle for politicians eager to advance their

careers. Of course, there are limits to how much influence populist appeals can truly wield given the nature of Japan's democracy. The Japanese citizenry is skeptical of rapid change and deeply committed to a peaceful foreign policy approach, populist politicians have faced substantial difficulty in consolidating their power due to the same proliferation of veto points that make strong political leadership difficult, and the permanent bureaucracy continues to wield considerable influence. So it is unlikely that emotional appeals will lead to major policy changes. Accordingly, insinuations that Japan is in danger of veering into militarism reflect either alarmism or a cynical effort to score political points while ignoring the true nature of Japan's policy processes.

Instead, the real risk of more nationalistic rhetoric is that it makes it harder for Japanese leaders to pursue cooperative relations with neighboring countries. Even when they clearly do not reflect any official position, inflammatory statements by Japanese public figures easily strike a nerve in China and Korea, provoking rounds of back-and-forth recriminations that further damage public sentiment about bilateral relations. Strong prime ministers are better positioned to work with overseas leaders to keep these types of irritants from souring bilateral relations, softening the impact of populism and keeping things from spiraling out of hand. Furthermore, in an era of weak political leadership, populist appeals are more likely to shape Japan's foreign policy debate, pushing it in directions that can limit the freedom of movement of the government and making it risky for leaders to be seen as taking conciliatory approaches.

A larger role for bureaucrats: A fourth important factor to consider is the fact that when Japan goes through spells of weak political leadership, career bureaucrats tend to assert more influence over foreign affairs. Skilled ministry officials know how to move the levers of policy when political leaders are distracted, and weak leaders have few options but to rely on them. While they are unlikely ever to return to the level of prominence they held through the 1980s, bureaucrats still wield considerable influence when there is a vacuum of leadership.

This has a number of implications. First, it reinforces the sense of continuity in foreign policy. While politicians rotate in and out of the government, officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who are on the front lines of foreign policy stay in their jobs for decades. As a result, the foreign ministry tends to hew to the policy lines that Japan

has pursued in the past, bringing a sense of stability and moderation to foreign policy discussions.

Second, a larger role for bureaucrats in foreign affairs also makes Japan likely to be less generous. Given its control over the government's purse strings, the Ministry of Finance traditionally plays a dominant role in interministerial relations and it is hard for other ministries to push back against it without the counterweight that strong political leadership might otherwise provide. In recent years, the finance ministry's top priority has been reducing the country's large national debt, so without a strong leader to advocate for bold international contributions and more development assistance, it seems probable that finance ministry officials will manage to gradually shrink Japan's official development assistance budget no matter how hard the foreign ministry argues against this. Similarly, it is difficult to envision major additional increases for Japan's defense budget despite a bipartisan consensus that Japan should be contributing more proactively in the context of the US-Japan alliance.

Gridlock on sticky issues: Finally, a return to the pattern of short-lived, weak prime ministers also means that Japan will probably find it even harder to deliver on international commitments that require leaders to expend significant domestic political capital. The relocation of US Marine Corps Air Station in Okinawa has famously been bogged down for two decades as tensions between the local Okinawan community and the national government have grown. The issues that have made US basing in Okinawa so contentious are liable to continue to fester with a return to weak leadership. Similarly, Japan is likely to struggle to make good on international agreements in other areas that threaten powerful domestic interests, such as on trade or the environment. Unless Japan's partners can find ways to downplay these persistent problems or reframe them in a more favorable context, they are likely to feed a sense of stagnation in bilateral relations.

When all of these considerations are taken into account, it appears likely that a reemergence of the pattern of short-lived, weak prime ministers will leave Japan muddling through in its foreign policy, maintaining a consistent policy line but finding itself challenged by frequent crises that it remains ill-equipped to handle. Regional relations seem bound to remain a flashpoint and occasional outbursts of populist or nationalistic rhetoric by enterprising politicians may nudge the policy debate

in Japan rightward, although concerns overseas that Japan is on the verge of becoming more aggressive in regional affairs are overblown.

Instead, the real risks associated with a persistence of weak leadership are threefold. First, Japan's international presence is in danger of waning even more. When Japan's prime ministers struggle to stay in office for just a year or two, they are unlikely to wield much clout in international diplomacy. And, with the country's economic clout on the wane, Japan's international contributions are also likely to be less generous. Second, the cumulative impact of a series of regional crises and populist appeals at home may gradually shift the parameters of Japan's foreign policy debate, making it even harder for prime ministers already grappling with fragile political bases to take conciliatory approaches in dealing with neighboring countries, even when it is in Japan's long-term interest. Third, the true damage of sustained political instability at the top may lie in the opportunities Japan is liable to miss to shape the regional order in Asia at a critical juncture. Without more proactive and strategic approaches, it will become difficult for Japan to partner with the United States and other likeminded countries in proactively managing the regional shift in power that is accompanying China's rise.

THE IMPLICATIONS FOR JAPAN'S PARTNERS

The likelihood of a return to the pattern of short-lived prime ministers changes the calculations that foreign policy thinkers in other countries have to make about dealings with Japan. There are a number of points they would do well to keep in mind.

First of all, it is important to operate with the awareness that Japan is likely to continue struggling with its domestic politics and that this constrains its prime minister more than is customary elsewhere. This does not mean that Japanese leaders should be excused when Japan falls short on its commitments or fails to contribute to the international community in a manner befitting its stature and wealth. However, it has implications for the tone and style that should be taken in dealing with Japan. Overseas leaders need to remain cognizant of the importance of giving weak prime ministers sufficient space to figure out face-saving ways to move forward, allowing Japan's leaders to appease their domestic political constituencies while ultimately producing the desired results. In particular, foreign governments should be careful to avoid being portrayed as forcing Japan to make painful domestic sacrifices. There

is a strong tendency in Japan for leaders to justify measures that hurt domestic constituencies by arguing they are necessary due to foreign pressure (*gaiatsu*), even when they are steps that the Japanese leaders wish to take for their country's benefit. In some cases, it is difficult to avoid becoming a domestic political scapegoat, but it becomes even more important for Japan's partners to tread carefully in eras of weak political leadership, when opposition leaders are tempted to target foreign relations to score political points and when the Japanese prime minister cannot persuasively argue that difficult steps are necessary for Japan's own self-interest.

At the same time, foreign leaders have to be careful not to "give up" on Japan, even when the prime minister cannot readily make the types of bold and straightforward commitments often expected of world leaders. Japan's leaders and the general public are cognizant of their country's decline in relative power, which seems even more precipitous when juxtaposed with China's rise, and this leaves them especially sensitive to indications that China or other countries are getting greater attention at Japan's expense. This sentiment is what made Abe's declaration during his 2013 visit to the United States that "Japan is back" resonate so strongly with some in Japan, even if little had changed substantively in bilateral relations.

Moreover, it is important to remember that even if Japan's prime minister does not tend to wield authority like the American president or UK premier in making international agreements, the fact remains that relations with Japan are increasingly multifaceted and many things can be advanced through steady engagement at lower levels of government-to-government relations. For instance, considerable progress has been made in strengthening US-Japan security cooperation over the past decade, even as a series of prime ministers rotated through office. While big wins may be rare in dealings with Japan, incremental gains are often possible, and they are more sustainable than high-profile commitments that are incompatible with political realities. This makes it essential for Japan and its partners to consistently press forward on multiple levels, not just through high-level summitry, and to get as much accomplished as possible without requiring top-down political intervention.

The likelihood that Japan will continue to face spells of weak political leadership—coupled with the fact that electoral reforms make the rotation of power more likely—also means that it is essential for other countries to engage in a nonpartisan manner with leaders across the political spectrum in Japan, not just with the ruling party. This is important

in order to sustain a nonpartisan consensus on bilateral relations as well as to be prepared for future changes of government. In 2009, when the DPJ came to power, few American leaders knew what to make of Hatoyama or most other top DPJ officials, and the impression quickly took hold that the DPJ was less friendly to the United States than its predecessors and, conversely, that the United States preferred the LDP over the DPJ. These impressions were as unhelpful as they were inaccurate, and they stemmed in part from a lack of familiarity and personal connections between American leaders and the new leaders who rode into power with the DPJ. Under the old 1955 system, it could suffice for overseas leaders to just worry about nurturing ties with the ruling LDP, since the prospects of the opposition Socialist Party coming to power were negligible. But this experience should serve as a reminder of how important it is now to be engaged in an evenhanded manner with all of the major political parties in Japan.

The probability of sustained political weakness also underscores how important it is for Japan and its partners to continue strengthening people-to-people ties. Even when there is little rapport between political leaders, a web of strong ties spanning different sectors of society serves as a stabilizing force in bilateral relations. This makes it all the more important strategically to nurture international educational exchanges, grassroots ties, and connections among professional associations.

Similarly, efforts to encourage deeper nongovernmental cooperation on a range of common challenges—for instance, encouraging research institutions to team up on energy issues, helping humanitarian groups from both countries to work together, and encouraging NGOs from Japan and its partner countries to team up in tackling health threats—can create momentum for bilateral cooperation that can later be ratified by political leaders, even if they were not strong enough or prescient enough to help catalyze this cooperation in the first place.

Finally, the challenges that weak prime ministers have tended to face in managing crises make it even more important for Japan's partners—particularly the United States—to help to put in place mechanisms that can reduce the risk that a crisis will spiral out of control. Particularly when it comes to Sino-Japanese relations, there is a tendency for domestic politics in the two countries to become entangled in destructive feedback loops, and it should thus be a top priority for American leaders and others to encourage Japan and China to implement a package of measures that would help prevent crises by expanding mutual understanding and transparency, as well as to create mechanisms for deescalating crises.

JAPAN'S WAY FORWARD

As the authors in this volume explain, much can be done in Japan to overcome the institutional imbalances that make it difficult for prime ministers to lead effectively and, by extension, to ameliorate the impact that weak political leadership in Japan has on international relations. There are institutional fixes that can be implemented, changes that can be made to party practices, and steps that leaders can take to help insulate foreign policy management from political instability.

Of course, the most straightforward path would be to reform Japan's governing institutions. Important steps have already been taken to strengthen the hand of the prime minister, most significantly through the establishment of the Cabinet Office, the strengthening of the Cabinet Secretariat, and in 2013, the creation of a National Security Council. But to date, no changes have dealt directly with the imbalances that electoral reform has exacerbated, making it difficult for the prime minister and his cabinet to advance their legislative agenda. Takenaka and others outline a number of steps that could help reduce the power of the Upper House to block legislation. These range from tweaks to the current system—for example, revising the "60 day rule,"[2] making it easier for the prime minister to make appointments, and giving the cabinet greater power to control the legislative process—all the way to such wholesale changes as abolishing the Upper House and moving to a unicameral system. However, these would all require a constitutional amendment, so they are unlikely to be implemented in the current political climate, even if they are worthy of serious consideration.

As Ochi notes, other institutional fixes worth exploring involve ways to minimize the likelihood of disparities in the results in the Lower House and Upper House elections in order to reduce the chances of a twisted Diet. One approach could be to hold elections for the Lower House and Upper House at the same time. However, while party leaders may occasionally decide to do this, it is hard to envision any way to introduce an official mandate for unified elections short of changing the entire electoral system. However, the only other step that would conceivably reduce disparities in the voting for the Upper and Lower Houses in a consistent manner would be a reversal of the electoral reforms that created single-seat constituencies in the Lower House in the first place.[3]

Of course, history shows that institutional reforms often lead to unintended consequences, so careful consideration has to be given to any major changes. As Satoru Mori cautions, any measures to further

strengthen the powers of the prime minister will inevitably leave more to his discretion, so it is important that those changes be coupled with steps to ensure he can draw on astute counsel and has the personal capacity to exercise sound judgment. Also, any changes should be implemented in a way that leaves viable checks and balances on the exercise of executive power, just not so many that it prevents the government from operating in a strategic and effective manner, as is all too often the case nowadays.

In addition to reforms of Japan's governing institutions, there are also a number of measures that the political parties can take to help their leaders be more effective. For example, revising party rules so that a sitting prime minister does not have to run for reelection as party head in the middle of his premiership is a commonsense measure that would eliminate one stumbling block that often helps force prime ministers from office. There are also steps that can be taken to better coordinate the policymaking process between the ruling party and the cabinet, including renewed efforts to make party leaders without government posts feel that their views are being taken into consideration. In addition, one particularly important task that parties need to consider is how to train and nurture up-and-coming political leaders so that they can gain governing experience and have a better grasp of policy issues, including foreign policy. Party factions used to play this role, but as their power has waned, there is a growing need for parties themselves to pick up the slack.

Also, the example of recent prime ministers shows that their governing approaches can make a big difference in terms of their longevity. One major lesson that can be drawn from the DPJ's tenure in power is the need for the prime minister and the cabinet to find a middle ground between allowing the bureaucracy an unfettered hand to shape policy and tightly controlling its every move. Especially in its first year in government, the DPJ overcompensated for years of hands-off treatment of bureaucrats by the LDP, choosing instead to try to micromanage ministry officials. They paid a heavy price when bureaucrats proved unable, and in some cases unwilling, to do what was needed to carry through on the new policies, demonstrating just how critical it is for the cabinet to find ways to delegate the implementation of policies to expert bureaucrats while remaining engaged enough to skillfully steer the government as a whole.

The issue of how to manage relations with the media has also become more important for political leaders. As Ando notes, one innovation that would help is the creation of a government press secretary post,

essentially shifting this function out of the portfolio of the chief cabinet secretary. This would allow the chief cabinet secretary to concentrate more on the critical job of policy coordination.

Even if reforms cannot be advanced in other areas, there are steps that can be taken to ensure that foreign policy management will be more consistent and strategic at times when Japan struggles with political leadership. Political leaders need to ensure that the foreign policy process works properly by striking the right balance in drawing on the advice of experts in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs while still steering the overall direction of Japan's diplomacy. Sustained efforts to strengthen the coordination of foreign policy are also crucial, particularly those that utilize the new National Security Council. It is also important to have more concerted efforts to sustain and strengthen a consensus on foreign and defense policy, both within parties and across party lines—especially on key issues like the US-Japan alliance, relations with China, and Japan's overall Asia strategy. These could include the creation of more study groups on foreign policy for political leaders from different parties and the encouragement of foreign travel by multiparty delegations.

Finally, there is much that can be done to strengthen Japan's nongovernmental policy community, which has a much weaker institutional base than in most other advanced democracies. Especially in light of the changing relationship with the bureaucracy, the prime minister and other political leaders need to be able to rely on alternative sources of policy advice, but the nongovernmental institutions that have the potential to provide such input remain underfunded and understaffed.

CONCLUSION

Japan is not unique. Most of the world's major democracies regularly grapple with some form of "leadership deficit" and struggle with political dysfunction. However, Japan's political institutions continue to leave the country's leaders in an especially weak position and, without further change, Japan seems bound to periodically slip back into the familiar pattern of short-lived, ineffectual premiers.

At home, the persistence of weak leadership is likely to feed further public disenchantment with politics and hamper efforts to implement bold, new policies. The daunting challenges that Japan faces—from economics to demographics—make it crucial for Japan to seriously consider further reforms to empower its leaders.

On the foreign policy front, a return to the pattern of short-lived leaders would be unfortunate, although not disastrous. A lack of strong political leadership does not mean that Japan cannot move forward gradually in strengthening its alliance cooperation with the United States, it does not mean that relations with China are destined to worsen, and it does not mean that Japan cannot deepen ties with its other Asian neighbors. Japanese foreign policy has been remarkably consistent, and it is buttressed by a general consensus across the political spectrum on the major issues of the day. The Japanese government can muddle through without a strong prime minister.

But weak political leadership threatens to inject further instability into regional relations and it erodes Japan's influence in global affairs. In the end, Japan and its partners risk missing opportunities to contribute to the international community and to shape the regional order in Asia at a pivotal point in history. That is the price that the Japanese public and others around the world are likely to pay without further steps to solve the dilemma of political leadership in Japan.

ENDNOTES

1. For instance, Sheila Smith points out that although relations with China have become a hot-button issue in Japan, even the most ardent conservatives still stick to the general consensus that, in dealing with China, it is important to maintain the formula of working toward "mutually beneficial relations based on common strategic interests." Sheila Smith, *Intimate Rivals: Japanese Domestic Politics and a Rising China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 254.
2. As Harukata Takenaka explains in Chapter 3, according to the "60 day rule" outlined in Article 59 of the Japanese Constitution, once the House of Representatives has passed a bill and submitted it to the House of Councillors, the latter has 60 days to take action on that bill. If the House of Councillors fails to take final action on the bill within the 60 days, the House of Representatives can take up the bill again and pass it into law with a two-thirds majority vote. In practice, opposition parties with significant representation in the House of Councillors have occasionally been able to use the 60 day rule to run out the time in the legislative session, blocking the ruling party from passing legislation that has overwhelming support.
3. Another step that might help around the margins is continued efforts to reduce the voting disparity in the Upper House that gives excessive influence to rural voters, making it less likely that different results will emerge from Upper House and Lower House elections.