

The Decay of the Angel: The Unraveling of Japan's Foreign Policy

Hatoyama Yukio and the Democratic Party of Japan swept to power last year amidst ecstatic hopes and extravagant claims of “regime change” that promised in its most giddy moments to renew Japan, to make it anew and finally bring to a close the “postwar” era. They were hardly alone in these expectations, excited and euphoric commentaries offered by the press and those in academia who should have known better cast last year’s election as representing a fundamental paradigm shift in postwar Japanese politics. The DPJ’s dexterity had in a single move isolated the once mighty Liberal Democratic Party and shorn it of its traditional dominance. The conservative party machine forged by Kishi Nobusuke, which had once summoned such magic and agility, had failed to muster even a token effort to retain political power and was now dangerously exposed. The thrall of its message, money and talent which had once seen off innumerable challenges to its hegemony no longer resonated with the Japanese public. It no longer seemed capable of making the great effort and sacrifice required for political power. The hunger was gone, the ambition a dim reflection of a party which at its apogee had bent the curve of postwar Japanese politics and society to agree with its vision of conservative power and purpose. Yet even in Hatoyama and the DPJ’s moment of triumph it was not too difficult to discern the figure of Nemesis, which defeats man by fulfilling his wishes too fully, beginning its long sweeping descent.

This scion of a great political family, whose grandfather had studied at Yale and forged the peace agreement with the Soviet Union to allow Japan to enter the U.N., might at first glance have seemed an improbable leader of the opposition, and as a beacon of change into which all the hopes and frustrations stemming from years of economic and political malaise were poured into. Yet he sought successfully to dismiss the concerns and suspicions of those who doubted his character and ability. At home he sought by dint of his own personality and popularity to end the dominance of the ailing LDP and break decisively with its postwar legacies. He would sweep away the settled and complacent ways and corruptions and banish its attendant shadows and conflicts. He would not be swayed by his predecessor’s vision of a proactive Japan and immediately set about repudiating their ambitious plans for Japanese power and purpose. At a minimum, he sought to change the tenor of the security discourse and slow the pace of Japanese security normalization. In its stead, Hatoyama proposed an overarching doctrine of Japanese retrenchment, a minimalist road in international security, and a refocus on domestic welfare at home that echoed the allure of Ishibashi Tanzan’s “small

Japanism.”

Abroad he sought to augur a new era in relations with Asia and China and a new coolness in relations with the United States. Japan would move away from its tight alliance with the United States towards a vaguely defined “independence.” Before his election Hatoyama had shown his hand when he declared that the influence of the US was in relative decline and that the world was marching towards a multi-polar order in which China would play a decisive role. He paid little heed to the fact that China whilst calling for a multipolar world sought nothing less than a unipolar Asia. But reality mustn't interfere with belief and doctrine. Such is the way with either idealists or cynics. No more, Hatoyama announced, would Japan follow the path that leads to obsequious. Japanese power and purpose would be engaged not on behalf of America but would instead be used to seek a new accommodation with China. Provocations would be downplayed, fundamental national interests obfuscated, what mattered would be accommodating China and finding a new role for Japan in the orbit and shadow of its emerging power. Indeed when the heir apparent to the leadership of the Chinese communist party came to call on Tokyo, mimicking the trip made by his predecessor, all protocol would be abandoned in order to accommodate his desire to meet with the ailing emperor.

Ozawa Ichiro, the eminence grise of the DPJ, sought to inaugurate this strategic turn by leading a delegation of over a hundred new parliamentarians to Beijing to shake hands with the new power from the East. The images of the new DPJ parliamentarians lined up in the Great Hall of the People come to pay tribute to the rulers in Beijing spoke volumes in diplomatic rooms of a tilt in the strategic wind blowing in the East. The meaning of that short, cynical voyage, to Beijing was a subtle and yet unmistakable. The symbolism and strategic implications of the trip could no longer be ignored by the new administration in Washington D.C. It was quite simply too blatant a challenge to America's long held preeminence. Even America's new standard bearer Barak Obama could not fail to discern the legitimate strategic implications of Japan's diplomatic drift. But like blind Cassandra's sure that only they could discern the tragic outlines of the future Hatoyama and Ozawa failed to grasp the ineludible reality that a policy of strategic deference to Chinese power did not come easy for such a proud nation. Hatoyama did not have the deft touch for foreign policy. If he had he would have known that only in the shadow of total defeat and physical impotence had Japan accepted that it had little choice but to adapt itself to the reality of American preeminence. China was

different. The accumulation of history, politics, pride and prestige would not allow Japan to so easily accept absorption and relative subordination within any nascent Sino-centric order. Those who thought otherwise were seeking to bend the curve of history back on itself.

The second element of Hatoyama's envisioned strategic reorientation would be his promise to reexamine the question of the US military presence on Okinawa, specifically the question of the Futenma Airbase. The base would be moved out of Japan if possible and if not at least out of Okinawa. The crowds applauded but the reaction from America was determined and clear: there would be no renegotiation of the agreement. The strained meeting with the American president in which Hatoyama would promise one thing to the protectors from afar and another to the people when the president left contributed to the doubts that were beginning to circle his leadership. Hatoyama could not make up his mind. His heart and natural instincts were with those who sought to reduce the US presence and alliance but those in his party and the bureaucracy would not give free rein to his idiosyncrasies. Public opinion always the most fickle and fabled of forces was beginning to turn on the issue. The glow of victory was quick to desert him and Hatoyama was left befuddled and with no tenable options save resignation. But he was not there yet. He asserted to all who would listen that he would find a compromise solution to a problem which he had authored. Yet his room for maneuver had narrowed sharply in the intervening months between the election and his self imposed deadline for making his mind up. He was not convinced even at this late stage that the possibilities had been exhausted. He sought once more to restore his credit with the Japanese public and with the power in Washington which had turned on him. Privately, and towards the end, often publically, he nursed the ambition to transcend all his problems and return to the beginning. For by now his hopes for transcendence were infused with the tragic consciousness of having lost the fickle favor of the crowd. Henry Kissinger once observed that for statesmen procrastination can be the most effective means of overcoming a dilemma, because the appearance of inaction and indecisiveness may conceal a deeper strategic wisdom and calculus. Such was not the case with Hatoyama Yukio. His disarray masked nothing so grand save his own irresponsibility and weak stewardship of Japanese power.

Hatoyama began to walk or rather run away from his old ambitions. The furies were circling ominously around his leadership and he rapidly lost control of his government's legislative agenda as he failed to consolidate a consensus around both his foreign and

domestic policy initiatives. Once more in Japanese politics a statesman's ambition had run ahead of domestic political realities and beyond the bounds which his country was willing to tolerate. Increasingly beleaguered by forces both within and without, Hatoyama became increasingly enmeshed with and reliant upon Ozawa Ichiro, whose machinations had installed Hatoyama in the leadership of the DPJ after he had been, forced to resign in scandal during the run up to last year's general election. Ozawa stands in Japanese politics like a spider in an intricate web of shifting alliances and affiliations. His political calculations and moves over the last two decades had spun a political web of exceeding complexity with Ozawa at its center. Only he comprehended its motions and internal rhythms enough to manipulate its component elements. Yet Ozawa himself was now weakened by financial scandal, an abrasive personality and public opposition within the DPJ, lacked the ability to recast the debate. The party which he forged out of the disparate ideological groups and held together by force of his own will and ambition had begun to call for his head. The public was no longer seduced by talk of a new era and a break with the past. The accumulation of failures, broken promises, mismanagement and scandal had swayed the zeitgeist. Novelties if not backed up by real plans capable of being brought to completion rapidly wear thin. The only thing left for Ozawa was to remove himself from any official position within the government whilst still maintaining his preeminence behind the scenes. He would continue to manipulate the complex web until changes in the domestic balance of power once more tipped the scales permitting him to return to prominence. Yet it was inescapable that Ozawa would be fundamentally diminished by victory as much as defeat. The rebuke from the public and his own party caught the great disciple of Tanaka Kakuei flatfooted, unable to find the words to explain the DPJ's historic reversal of fortune. On the night of the recent election where he was once a ubiquitous presence there was only shattering silence. Such is the nature of supreme embarrassment.

Nemesis, which brings all statesmen to tragic ruin, caught up much too quickly for Hatoyama. His unlikely ascendance to the leadership before the election had infused him with an ephemeral political magic which was never naturally his and when the magic deserted him, he was swiftly undone by those whose initial infatuation had now turned to unrestrained bitterness. Each broken promise and failure only intensified the feelings of those whose hopes had not been exceeded. Like a tragic lover scorned the swiftness of their change seemed to shake the mild leader more than anything else. The DPJ had allowed itself to be carried along by the charisma and magic of this otherwise

inarticulate man who promised regime change and a clean break with the past. He had won an election and for that they were thankful. But he interpreted victory differently than his diverse party. For Hatoyama it was nothing less than an opportunity to loosen the constraints of alliance with the US and forge a new diplomatic path. The compact at the heart of Japanese politics over the alliance with the US which had served Japan for fifty years would be reshaped to reflect his confidence in illusions. Yet from the beginning there was a disjunction between Hatoyama's aims and his ambition. There was nothing visceral in his desire to stay on as prime minister. The malaise of his policies and the dysfunctional nature of his executive were too readily apparent to all observers. He made the cardinal error of Japanese prime ministers by fatally mishandling the political and security alliance with the United States whilst at the same time failing to consolidate power at home. He ignored the accumulated experience and maxims derived from the political experience of the postwar era: Japan must be brought to the moment of change imperceptibly without realizing that it had in fact changed. Change could only be accomplished with "the illusion of stability." Hatoyama's worst political instincts and ambitions had been driven to their logic ends by an inopportune and ill destined alliance with the reflexively anti-American Socialist Party and the now decimated New People's Party made up of members expelled from the LDP. His break with the Socialist Party was acrimonious and divisive and foreshadowed his own end in the face of the public rejection of his ideological program. His resignation when it did come was the result of the political and diplomatic crises which both he and Ozawa Ichiro had authored together.

Upon his resignation the truth of his months in power was all too clear: strategic vertigo in Japanese diplomacy, a weakened political and security alliance with the United States and a worrying deference and willingness to acquiesce to Chinese leadership in the region and over sensitive issues of national sovereignty. At its core of his foreign policy failures was the prevalence of a false dichotomy surprisingly resilient in Japanese intellectual and political circles that either Japan retains its alliance with the US or bandwagons with China. In retrospect the patina of internationalism at the core of the DPJ's thinking concealed a banal anti-Americanism and resurgent Asianism whose binary division of the world prefigured a sterility of strategic vision and a negation of recent Japanese diplomatic history. It represented a broad assault on the traditions of postwar Japanese statecraft and its strategic alliance with the United States, which for fifty years has served as a force multiplier for Japanese diplomacy and power, whilst fulfilling the dual purpose of limiting regional disquiet, and calming fears

at home of a militarist revival. Everywhere there was on display the result of these months of irresponsibility and retrenchment.

Such a moment was worlds away from the time of Koizumi and Abe who together had sought a bold new definition of Japanese power and security. Beginning in 2000 they had embarked on a policy of strategic realignment and activism that aimed at arresting the relative decline of Japanese national power and transforming the laws, institutions and military doctrine at the heart of postwar Japanese grand strategy. They had moved opportunistically to overcome the postwar political, legal and normative constraints on Japanese security enacting a series of dramatic and sweeping new policies that would provide the legislative and strategic conceptual framework through which Japan would respond to the new post-Cold War security environment. They pursued a new strategic calculus that at long last held out the promise of replacing Japan's steadfast avoidance of a commitment to regional security with a new willingness to shoulder the responsibility of power.

To be sure there was disquiet and opposition to this vision both within Japan and without. The cold calculus in Beijing was to wait out the burst of Japanese security activism and bank on the return to irresponsibility and weakness. Seasoned observers of Japanese politics and security, they believed that Japan was now strategically adrift, isolated in its region and from its far away protector, without the will to action required of great power. They knew that grand strategic ambition did not stir Hatoyama's successor the former human rights lawyer Kan Naoto. It was not foreign but domestic issues that appealed to his heart. The ambitions of his agenda were decisively domestic: economic rejuvenation, security and welfare at home. Defeat in the recent election further narrowed the political space for maneuver and curtailed the incentives for taking the moral choices necessary to deal with the implications of Japan's strategic vertiginous. Put simply, the avoidance of political disaster would be an accomplishment of its own magnitude at this late date. The temper of politics in Japan would no longer turn on questions of prestige and honor, ambition and power. There was no longer the political will for grand action, statesmen no longer seem capable or willing to transcend the historic inertia and shape the recalcitrant material of postwar Japan. In its stead would inexorably follow the lesser greatness of isolationism. Statesman set priorities among the interests and pressures of both their society and the international system. This is how it should be. Yet one cannot escape the almost ineluctable reality that Japan is in an essential respect, diminished, and smaller for its resignation and the region

itself more hazardous and uncertain for the absence.

Fouad Ajami has observed that the world has a way of calling the bluff of leaders and nations summoned to difficult endeavors. This is the tragic shape that fate bequeaths to nations and men. It discerns the ambitions and measure of statesmen and weighs their doctrines in the balance. It provides the rare statesman the ability to reach beyond the confines of their material and touch the destiny of a state. History and international politics possess a tragic dimension because the conflict over ideas reflects the fundamental incommensurability of conception and political action. Yet the true test of political leadership and statesmanship it has been observed is to recognize the real relationship of forces and to translate this knowledge and recognition into successful political action. The tragedy of Hatoyama and the DPJ has been that they sought not so much recognition as a transcendence of all considerations of power and national interest. For transcendence requires overcoming the past and all its lessons about the recalcitrance of history and power to thwart man's designs. Accounts and alliances forged before the transcendence are simply the remnants of dead ways of the past. Moments of political euphoria and delirium give rise to irresponsibility and diplomatic failure whose long term implications can only be hinted at in the present. Such is the situation with Japan at this moment where politics seems poised at its apogee and decline.

Andrew Levidis

PhD Candidate, University of Melbourne and presently a Monbukagakusho Scholar at Kyoto University