

Japan's Counter-Strike Debate amid the post-Prime Minister Abe Leadership Race

By Yoichiro Sato

Japanese Defense Minister Taro Kono on June 15 announced the cancellation of the planned procurement of two Aegis Ashore systems from the United States. The cancellation, which reportedly was discussed and decided only by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga in advance, left a gap in the country's missile defense against the growing missile threats from its neighbors. The Aegis Ashore decision prompted the government to revise the National Security Strategy (NSS) within 2020. As the NSS is the basis for the National Defense Program Outline (NDPO), the latter is also being revised.

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Professor at
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University, explains that
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Kono in the Lower House Committee on Security on July 8 testified that policy considerations by the government would include possession of "enemy base strike capabilities." The ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) subsequently formed a project team (PT) on missile defense, chaired by former Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera. The PT discussions produced by the end of July a set of recommendations inclusive of a more vaguely phrased "consideration of the ability to head off missiles in enemy territory," which became the LDP recommendation to the government.

Meanwhile, the LDP's coalition partner, Komeito (Clean Government Party, or CGP), on July 15 held its Foreign Policy and Security Research Council to discuss missile defense (MD), but decided not to include "enemy base strike" in the agenda for the time-being.

The Aegis Ashore decision, revisions of NSS and NDPO and coalition domestic politics are in turn closely tied with both leadership succession within the LDP and the possibility of a snap election. Abe's premiership was tied to his presidency of the ruling LDP. His party presidency was set to expire in September 2021, while the full term of the current lower house of the parliament extended until October 21. With a dwindling cabinet support rate, Taro Aso, a key faction leader and the closest ally of Abe, had repeatedly called for an early snap election. A snap election in 2021 (after revised NSS and NDPO endorsing possession of counter-strike capabilities are published) would possibly jeopardize the present ruling coalition with the CGP. This calculus would compel the LDP to call an election within 2020 and bet on a favorable seat count in order to pursue a major security policy shift. The CGP has opposed an early election, but by early July, it completed the list of candidates it will run in single-member districts—suggesting that it would be ready to contest elections if the decision to hold them was taken. Two key opposition parties with common roots in the former Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), the Democratic Party for the People (DPP) and the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP), have in principle agreed on their merger. Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga is also reportedly seeking a possible coalition with the conservative Japan Restoration Party (JRP).

With the re-rising coronavirus infection counts since July, there is little public enthusiasm for a snap election in the fall. Suga has made a public comment that Abe should focus on dealing with the pandemic. On August 28, however, Abe announced his intention to resign, citing his own health concerns. The cabinet has promoted a policy of balancing the economic and quarantine requirements. Mainstream factions within the LDP have thrown their support behind Suga as the next party president (and hence prime minister) to succeed Abe, in order to ensure continuity in the current policy. Abe's cabinet support rate rose on public sympathy upon the announcement of resignation, and this may have created a momentum for an early election under the new prime minister.

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In the event of a snap election, there are three likely scenarios. First, the LDP-CGP coalition holds by winning a majority. The CGP will make it a condition to stay in the coalition that the government should not adopt possession of counter-strike capabilities as part of the NSS revision. Second, the JRP joins the ruling coalition to secure a majority. With the CGP still in the coalition, the government will not be able to adopt a counter-strike policy. Third, a new coalition of the LDP and the JRP secures a majority and drops the CGP. In this scenario, the government may adopt a limited counter-strike policy.

Abe and Aso's influence as the king makers appear to have declined already, as both leaders watch the party secretary Toshihiro Nikai ally with Suga to control the selection of the next LDP president. The centrist faction leaders like Nikai and Wataru Takeshita are more cautious about the possession of counter-strike capabilities than Abe and Aso, who had to give up their little concealed plan to install former foreign minister Fumio Kishida as Abe's successor. The LDP may win more seats in a snap election, but the gain will not enhance the conservative factions while the Party Secretary Nikai controls candidate selection and funding behind Suga, who leads no faction. In short, no strong conservative leadership is to be expected in Japan between now and fall 2021.

Given the already vague language in the PT recommendation, revised NSS and NDPO will likely be vague about possession of counter-strike capabilities, and their implementation will likely be postponed under the new government. Given such political prospects, possession of counter-strike capabilities will likely remain a mere "consideration".

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