

# Abe snap election move makes waves

Japan PM has taken a risk but could not allow Tokyo governor more time to broaden her support base

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has taken a political gamble by dissolving the lower house of parliament on Sept 28 to call a snap election on Oct 22.

In so doing, he wants to take advantage of the country's weak opposition parties. Abe's sudden announcement caught his rivals unprepared, except for the popular Tokyo governor, Yuriko Koike.



Cai Hong

As the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) refused to support her in the 2016 race for Tokyo governor, Koike defied the party. Her Tokyo Citizens First party won a sweeping victory in the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly election on July 2, dethroning the LDP by becoming the largest party in the assembly.

Throwing down the gauntlet to the LDP again, Koike established a new "reformist, conservative" Party of Hope late last month for the upcoming general election.

The Democratic Party, which was Japan's largest opposition party, effectively disbanded when its leader attempted to have all its members run in the election on the Party of Hope's ticket.

Koike, however, turned down

the Democratic Party's liberal members, enrolling its conservatives who agree with her policies on amending Japan's constitution and the security legislation that allows for an expanded role overseas for the country's Self-Defense Forces.

Several Democratic Party heavyweights, such as former prime minister Yoshihiko Noda, a self-proclaimed "moderate conservative", have decided to run as independents.

Meanwhile, Yukio Edano, the Democrats' left-leaning deputy president, formed a new Constitutional Democratic Party on Oct 2 to attract liberal votes in the general poll. The party will "protect constitutionalism, democracy, liberal society and citizens' livelihoods", Edano said, asking voters for "the power to put a stop to the excesses" of the Abe administration.

So, now there is the LDP with its junior coalition partner Komeito on one side and seven opposition parties and independent candidates on the other.

Though all aim to topple the LDP-Komeito coalition, the opposition parties can hardly unite as one, despite having some policies in common.

On the conservative side of the opposition camp, the Party of Hope, the Japan Innovation Party, the Liberal Party and the Party for Japanese Kokoro support constitutional change.

On the left side, the Constitu-

tional Democratic Party, the Japan Communist Party and Social Democratic Party want to keep the constitution intact and call for abolishing the security legislation that took effect last year.

But among the opposition leaders, there have been talks focused on coordination. In a reciprocal agreement, Koike said her new party will not contest seats in Osaka prefecture, to help candidates from the Japan Innovation Party headed by the Osaka governor. In return, Osaka Governor Ichiro Matsui's party will not field candidates in Tokyo races, to boost the chances of Koike's Party of Hope.

A total of 465 seats will be up for grabs in the Oct 22 election. The ruling coalition of the LDP and Komeito party held more than 300 seats in the lower house before the chamber was dissolved.

The race is likely a three-way battle between the LDP, Koike's party — the two are conservative in nature — and Edano's liberal force.

A Kyodo News poll showed that the LDP has the highest support rating ahead of the election at 24.1 percent, more than nine points ahead of Koike's Party of Hope. But the disapproval rating for the Abe cabinet stood at 46.2 percent, with the approval rate at 40.6 percent. And 45.9 percent chose Abe for prime minister, with 33 percent backing Koike.

The news that Japan's economy is picking up pace may help the ruling

coalition. The Bank of Japan's *tankan* — a closely watched quarterly survey of more than 10,000 companies — showed that confidence among Japan's biggest manufacturers has jumped to its highest level in a decade.

Japan's economy expanded in the April-June period, capping six straight quarters of gains in its longest winning streak in more than 10 years.

The LDP has come up with a campaign platform pledging that the party will aim to make the first-ever amendment to the constitution "on the basis of sufficient debate inside and outside the party" on such issues as including the Self-Defense Forces in the charter. It also wants to have the consumption tax rate raised in 2019 as planned and increase financial input in education and child-rearing support.

The opposition parties have no clear campaign pledges so far.

The Democratic Party of Japan swept to victory in a 2009 election, buoyed by public anger over corruption in the long-ruling LDP and promising to prioritize investment in people over infrastructure.

But its administration was marred by errors, as well as the 2011 tsunami and nuclear crisis. After a rapid series of changes in leadership, the Democrats lost power to Abe's LDP in December 2012.

Since then, the party has changed leaders several times, but failed to

restore public confidence.

But the fledgling Constitutional Democratic Party attracted more than 80,000 followers on Twitter in less than two days, drawing a lot of attention. The LDP has 110,000 followers, and the Party of Hope only slightly more than 2,700.

Abe, though becoming vulnerable after a string of political scandals, has met with no seriously strong resistance during his five-year reign. No general election is needed to be held until late 2018.

Analysts have compared his decision to British Prime Minister Theresa May's call for a snap election in June, which saw her Conservative Party lose its overall majority. But Abe cannot wait and give Koike more time to broaden her support base and become an even bigger threat.

Koike has said her party is intent on winning a majority of the seats in the lower house.

If she wants to become Japan's first female prime minister, she has to run for a seat in the more powerful chamber by resigning as Tokyo's governor. But such a political gamble does invite a potential backlash from voters. Candidates must register on Oct 10.

Abe's decision to call a snap election has made a big splash in Japan's political dynamics.

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## Wrong to see China as next big threat

US hawks search for new enemy to justify military buildup but this runs counter to America's interests

By DOUG BANDOW

The collapse of the Soviet Union left the United States alone at the pinnacle of power. That was good for world peace but bad for the Pentagon. Since then, much of the US foreign policy establishment has searched for a new enemy to justify a military buildup.

President Donald Trump does not appear to think much about geopolitics. But there are many hawks in the US who are presenting China as the next big threat.

In its report, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2017*, the US Department of Defense noted that China had improved its capacity to undertake joint operations and

fight short conflicts further from the mainland. Moreover, the report said that "China has leveraged its growing power to assert its sovereignty claims over features in the East and South China Seas" and "used coercive tactics, such as the use of law enforcement vessels and its maritime militia, to enforce maritime claims and advance its interest in ways that are calculated to fall below the threshold of provoking conflict".

Perhaps most significant, the Pentagon noted that "China's leaders remain focused on developing the capabilities to deter or defeat adversary power projection and counter third-party intervention — including by the United States — during crisis or conflict". That includes limiting the US' technological advantage.

None of which is surprising, or

particularly threatening to the US. Of course, Washington would prefer a docile China which accepts the US' lead. But rising powers rarely agree to remain a vulnerable second.

Nevertheless, the US has a much larger military and spends roughly four times as much on its armed forces. The US has more than six times as many nuclear warheads deployed and more stockpiled. The US possesses 10 carrier groups, while China has one rudimentary aircraft carrier.

Most important, Beijing has only modest ability to project power, especially to attack the continental US. In contrast, the US military has multiple means to strike China.

Finally, Washington augments its power through alliances with most of the world's other industrialized

states and projects it by means of multiple bases along China's eastern periphery. China is essentially alone and is surrounded by countries with which it has been at war over the last century. Some territorial disputes could turn violent.

In short, in the near- to mid-term at least, in any real sense the US has little to fear from China. Even if Beijing desired to threaten the US homeland, conquer US territories, or interdict US commerce, it has little ability to do so. What China seeks is to end Washington's dominance along the former's coast, an objective more defensive than offensive.

And economics is on Beijing's side. It is far costlier to project power than deter its use. How much is Washington willing to spend to maintain the overwhelming military

superiority necessary to impose its will on China throughout the latter's own region? Such a military is going to grow less affordable over time.

The Congressional Budget Office predicts trillion-dollar annual deficits within a decade, and rising outlays on entitlements in future years. Are Americans prepared to sacrifice domestic needs for defense not of their own nation, but of allied states which underfund their own militaries?

The US and China will inevitably have disagreements. However, they have no vital interests in conflict. Indeed, there is no serious cause for conflict if Washington is willing to accommodate China's rise.

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