

Abe has no more gambles left

Japan's divided opposition loses and prime minister stays at the helm without real popularity as leader

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe got a phone call on Oct 23 from his British counterpart Theresa May, who congratulated him on his win in Japan's election.

May lost an overall majority in the British parliament after the extraordinary gamble she made in calling a snap election in June to take advantage of what she believed to be a weak opposition. And now she must govern with support from Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party.



Cai Hong

But Abe's political opportunism paid off. In the Oct 22 snap election, his ruling coalition won two-thirds of seats in the lower house of parliament, maintaining its overwhelming majority. Abe can now stay in power until autumn 2021, which will help him bid for a third term in the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leadership race in September 2018.

Since taking the helm of the party, Abe has led it to five landslide victories in national elections. The LDP's control of postwar Japan has

been nearly absolute, broken only by a short-lived coalition government of opposition parties in 1993-1994 and by the 2009 victory of the Democratic Party of Japan, which ruled until 2012.

The LDP alone won 284 seats in the lower chamber of parliament in this election. But its junior partner, Komeito, has suffered a blow, dropping from 35 seats to 29. The centrist party's coalition with the center-right LDP, which has rammed a series of controversial bills through parliament in the past five years, has cost Komeito public support.

Voters cast two ballots — one for an individual candidate in a single-seat constituency and another for a political party for proportional representation.

Under the single-seat constituency system, the candidate with the most votes wins. For the Oct 22 election, the ruling coalition worked together to field just one candidate per constituency. At the same time, a divided opposition helped the ruling coalition's candidates.

Under the country's proportional voting system, there are 11 regions. Each party gets seats in proportion to the percentage of votes it receives. Candidates who lose in their single-seat constituency can

still end up in parliament through the proportional ballot.

The absolute ratio of votes the LDP garnered in the Oct 22 election stood at a mere 25.2 percent, about the same level as that in the 2009 general poll that unseated the party.

The absolute ratio represents the proportion of the number of votes a party wins in single-seat constituencies to the voting-age population, and is believed to tell a party's real strength.

Despite the low ratio of votes, the LDP managed to win by landslides in the 2012 and 2014 general elections. The low turnout and flagging popularity of opposition parties worked in favor of the LDP.

The Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications said that only 53.68 percent of voters went to the polling stations on Oct 22 — the second-lowest turnout since World War II.

Efforts to get to the bottom of favoritism scandals involving two school operators have had to stop due to the election. People say Abe has yet to provide detailed and acceptable explanations about his involvement. Support for Abe, battered by these scandals and by voters' perception that he took them for granted, dived from 60 percent early this year to 26 percent in late July.

When the parliament convenes in

January 2018, opposition lawmakers are expected to continue to grill Abe over allegations of cronyism.

Any misstep the new Abe cabinet makes will see approval ratings fall again.

The Asahi Shimbun was right to call the election results "a defeat of the opposition parties" rather than a victory of the ruling camp.

Half of those who support Abe do so because there is no alternative, according to the national public broadcaster NHK. The opposition parties are ideologically divided.

People in Japan want to see a balance of power between the ruling and opposition camps rather than the LDP's political dominance, which appears to have made the ruling party arrogant.

Even the conservative *Yomiuri Shimbun* argued that when the ruling camp enjoys an overwhelming majority in parliament, a fragmented opposition cannot hope to act as an effective watchdog of the administration.

There may be a movement to realign the opposition parties. People are watching closely whether two left-leaning opposition parties, the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) and the Communist Party of Japan, will build a meaningful alliance. The two parties teamed up in the election, which helped the CDP

make a strong showing. Winning 55 seats, the CDP has turned out to be the biggest in the opposition camp. Some independents and defectors from the newly formed Party of Hope, which performed disappointingly, may join forces with the CDP.

The special session of Japan's parliament will re-elect Abe as prime minister on Nov 1, when the new Abe cabinet will be sworn in. Pressing concerns for Abe are Japan's economy, low birth rate and aging society — all hard nuts to crack. He is also eager to make his dream come true — amending the country's pacifist constitution.

Abe will show solidarity on the need to increase pressure on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea when meeting with US President Donald Trump, who will visit Japan on Nov 5-7.

Knowing that he is at the helm without popularity, Abe vowed at a press conference on Oct 23 to run his administration "humbly and sincerely". If his approval ratings plummet sharply, he has no more political gambles left to play. Rivals within his own party have made no secret of their intention to replace him next year.

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The effective diplomacy of reassurance

By EDUARDO ARARAL

Napoleon Bonaparte once said: "China is a sleeping giant. Let her sleep, for when she wakes she will move the world."

China has woken up and shaken the world, but not the way Napoleon or many others feared. Instead, it has injected vital energy into the world economy, staunchly defended globalization and helped improve infrastructure in cooperation with other countries.

China has woken up to defend free trade and stand by the Paris climate agreement and UNESCO. It has also woken up to give thousands of scholarships to students from developing countries while welcoming students from the West.

Through actions and policies, at

a time when the West is retreating from the global stage and cooperation, China aims to reassure the world of its continued cooperation. And that is precisely what General Secretary Xi Jinping focused on at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China on Oct 18.

Reassuring the world that China will adhere to peace regardless of how powerful it becomes, Xi has built on the foundations of friendship and sincerity, mutual respect for core interests and major concerns, dialogue and non-confrontation, and a win-win approach.

I call this the principle of reassurance, which is at the core of China's new model of diplomacy for both big and small countries and in total contrast to theories used to frame US-China relations, such as hege-

mony and the Cold War mentality of confrontation, proxy wars and containment.

Some examples illustrate the principle of reassurance.

First, on the issue of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's nuclear program, Washington has been raising the rhetoric and firing salvos.

On the other hand, Beijing strongly calls for de-escalation and reasonable sanctions without closing the door to dialogue while fully supporting UN Security Council sanctions against Pyongyang.

Second, smaller countries, especially those in China's neighborhood, seek assurance from China that it will help maintain peace even as it becomes more powerful. The Philippines is a test case.

The Philippines and China had,

until recently, serious maritime boundary disputes. We now see a non-confrontational bilateral relationship that is marked by more dialogue and the understanding of each other's interests.

Third, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) wants assurance from China that the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea will be honored, which is also what China wants.

The more China and ASEAN reassure each other, the more progress can be made in terms of the code's framework and operation.

And fourth, ASEAN wants assurance from both China and the United States that the bloc will not be used for their proxy rivalry.

In conclusion, the inherent uncertainties, suspicions and competition between the US and China

reinforce the need for credible reassurance. It is good that the US and China have institutionalized their strategic dialogues and that US President Donald Trump will visit China in November.

Given that China's rise is likely to raise suspicions, Beijing is right to adopt the principle of reassurance. If successful, China's new model of diplomacy will belie Graham Allison's Thucydides trap as a figment of a Western scholar's imagination. It will also be regarded as one of the big contributions of Xi to the world.

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