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A Japan Shake Up?

August 23rd, 2009 — Scott Hartley

U.S.-Japan relations have never been stronger, but change during the month of August is perhaps the greatest since 1955. On August 20 the U.S. Ambassador [John Roos](#) assumed duty of the Embassy in Tokyo, bringing with him from his perch as CEO of a top Silicon Valley law firm, a wealth of Internet, high technology, and legal expertise:

“Throughout his tenure, John helped lead the firm during the various waves of innovation in Silicon Valley, from the growth of software and communications to the Internet Age, the emergence of biotechnology to the present focus on clean technology and renewable energy.”

Concurrently Japan, the world’s second largest economy, is to host its national elections. A Parliamentary Democracy, Japan has both an Upper House of Councillors and a Lower House of Representatives. On August 30, elections in the latter will determine the distribution of power across the 480 seats, and it’s interesting because the Liberal Democratic Party ([LDP](#)) has been in power (except for 10 months, 20 days) since 1955. Largely seen as the guardian of the post-Cold War U.S.-Japan relationship, the LDP has been relatively unopposed in ruling seats in the Japanese Diet. However, polls indicate that the Democratic Party of Japan ([DPJ](#)) could alter Japanese history.

Currently the DPJ holds 112 seats in the Lower House. They would need 220 to have a “relative majority,” 241 for a “majority,” and 269 for an “absolutely stable majority,” according to Takako Hikotani of Japan’s National Defense Academy, formerly at Harvard. A potential LDP loss, and DPJ win would unsettle an institutional path dependence, and shake up ties in a country built of relationships. Such a DPJ win could have profound impact on US-Japan political, security, and technology relations. With issues such as the [Support of Forces Agreement](#), a potential US-Japan Free Trade Agreement (FTA), Okinawa U.S. troop deployment, and Japan’s perennial “[Article 9](#)” debate on the purview of its military, a DPJ win next Sunday could create substantive bilateral and regional change.

On security issues the U.S. collaborates with Japan on regional air defense, missile defense, and maritime security, but it’s the economics that are perhaps even more central to the bilateral US-Japan amity. The US and Japan cooperate on multiple fronts, not least of which is technology development. Recent Japanese GDP data indicated 3.7 percent growth, but confirmation that the country is still reliant on export demand in the West. “Decoupling” remains but a sound-bite on CNBC. Domestic groups such as the [Japanese Business Federation](#) state that a DPJ win could mean labor reform, new targets on unemployment, and potential for immigration policy alteration.

But at the end of the day, a DPJ win will not likely alter Japanese green technology development as a

priority, and U.S.-Japan technology transfer as a silicon cornerstone of pan-Pacific partnership. While the acronym associated with Lower House Diet seats may change, while business-to-government relationships may need to refresh, and while this is no doubt historic, bilateral technology cooperation will remain a core issue. President Obama's appointment of John Roos, a lawyer skilled in Internet venture capital, heralds a cooperative continuation. Perhaps it's fitting that Ambassador Roos' transition from Silicon Valley to Akasaka can be monitored across Japan on Palo Alto-based [Facebook](#), and described on Deputy Chief of Mission James Zumwalt's blog, "[Z Notes](#)."



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