



Media Briefing

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WASHINGTON-- On October 22, voters in Japan took to the polls and overwhelmingly supported Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's Liberal Democratic Party and its coalition government. The landslide election resulted in a two-thirds majority for the LDP and Komeito, which may allow Prime Minister Abe to seek an amendment to the nation's constitution for the first time in post-war history.

Here are the highlights from the Sasakawa USA discussion:

Daniel Bob

Director of Programs and Senior Fellow, Sasakawa USA

- The results from Sunday's snap Lower House election in Japan had the LDP winning in a landslide, which will give the ruling parties more than two-thirds of the seats in the chamber, thus allowing the Prime Minister to pursue his long-sought goal of amending the constitution to formally recognize Japan's Self-Defense Forces.
- This victory sets the stage for Prime Minister Abe to run for a third three-year term as president of the LDP in September of next year.
- If that happens, he could have four more years to seal his legacy, which would include serving longer than any other prime minister in modern Japanese history.
- In calling the snap election, Abe said he needed a new mandate to address a "national crisis" posed by North Korea's missile and nuclear advances, as well as the challenges of a fast-aging population, and to gain approval for his plan of shifting revenue from a planned sales tax hike to education and child care rather than to decreasing national debt.
- Other key issues Abe will need to address include:
 - A rising China whose president, Xi Jinping, has consolidated power and has ambitions to raise the country's influence economically and militarily.
 - A visit by President Trump in a couple of weeks. The prime minister has been able to forge a close relationship with the president, probably the closest of any world leader.
 - A meeting between Vice President Pence and Deputy Prime Minister Aso in which the U.S. side pushed for a bilateral FTA, which Japan opposes.

Tobias Harris

Fellow for Economy, Trade, and Business, Sasakawa USA

- This election was not about policy as it was in 2012, but rather it was about the balance of power in the political system.
- Leading up to August 2017, Prime Minister Abe's poll ratings were trending downward, and he appeared vulnerable due to in-fighting within his party and other issues. In August, there was an increase in Abe's poll numbers as he reshuffled his cabinet and dealt with North Korean missile launches.
- Yesterday's victory for the LDP was more a reflection of Abe's new cabinet movements and a weak opposition than the threat from a hostile DPRK.
- Turnout during the election was just one percent higher than in 2014--quite low for a general election.
- The success of the election and the resulting two-thirds majority for the Abe Coalition government is a signal of Abe's power within his party, which some factions in the LDP might have challenged had the results been less positive for Abe.

- Even with the gains by the LDP, the make-up of the Diet remains pretty much the same as before the election.

Dr. Takako Hikotani

Gerald L. Curtis Associate Professor of Modern Japan Politics and Foreign Policy, Columbia University

- The election was more about the economy than national security.
- Prime Minister Abe's attempts to amend the constitution will be focused on recognizing that Japan can have self-defense forces.
- A significant point about voters was that 18-19 year olds--able to vote for the first time--supported the LDP in larger numbers than older voters.

James Schoff

Senior Fellow, Asia Program, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

- A recent Pew Research Center poll showed that among the Japanese public, the confidence in the United States has dropped significantly since the Obama administration and the public holds very little confidence in President Trump. Also, U.S. power and influence is now seen as more threatening, with both China and the U.S. now considered a "potential grave threat to Japan" by a majority of the Japanese public.
- Despite these recent statistics, President Trump's upcoming trip to Japan is perceived as mostly positive.
- Now that Prime Minister Abe will have a super majority, he will have more space to move on security issues and collective self-defense. However, he faces real challenges from China and North Korea.

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About Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA

Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA is an independent American non-profit, non-partisan institution devoted to research, analysis, and better understanding of the U.S.-Japan relationship. Through research and education programs, Sasakawa USA facilitates people-to-people exchange and dialogue between American and Japanese policymakers, influential citizens, and the broader public.

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