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The Suga Administration

Balancing Continuity and Reform

Summarized by Dr. Gerald Curtis, Burgess Professor Emeritus at Columbia University, and Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA

Abstract

On Monday, October 26, 2020, Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA (Sasakawa USA) welcomed Dr. Gerald Curtis, Burgess Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Columbia University, to discuss recent political developments in Japan with a focus on Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and his administration, outline what major challenges await Prime Minister Suga's administration, and assess the future outlook of U.S.-Japan relations under his direction. Dr. Curtis's longtime commitment to advancing the understanding of Japanese politics and international relations brought an informed and insightful perspective to the webinar.

This talk was presented through Sasakawa USA's Policy Briefing Series and held virtually via Zoom. Attendees included distinguished guests from the Washington D.C. and Japanese policy communities, academia, and think tanks as well as guests from the Sasakawa Peace Foundation in Tokyo. Dr. Atsushi Sunami, President of Sasakawa Peace Foundation, introduced Dr. Curtis, and Dr. Satohiro Akimoto, Chairman and President of Sasakawa USA, moderated the webinar and facilitated the Q&A.

Remarks by Dr. Gerald Curtis

Dr. Curtis began his remarks by discussing his view of PM Suga's administration. Dr. Curtis stated that during PM Suga's seven years as Chief Cabinet Secretary for former PM Shinzo Abe, PM Suga built a reputation for being tough, decisive, and loyal to PM Abe and to his domestic and foreign policy agenda. When PM Abe resigned suddenly in September, PM Suga, who belongs to none of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) factions and who as recently as a year ago was not considered a likely successor to PM Abe was elected as prime minister. Dr. Curtis noted that suddenly PM Suga's lack of an LDP factional affiliation became an asset, facilitating his acceptance by the overwhelming majority of LDP Diet members. PM Suga's tenure is just for one year, the remaining time in PM Abe's most recent three-year term as party president. The decision to make him LDP president was decided by the party's Diet members alone. However, Dr. Curtis stated that when PM Suga faces an LDP election next September for a regular three-year term not only the party's Diet members but more than a million rank and file party members will participate in choosing the party leader. From now to next September, Dr. Curtis recommended that PM Suga focus on winning the support of the party's rank and file as well as its Diet members if he is to continue as prime minister.

PM Suga's Response to COVID-19

Next, Dr. Curtis turned his attention to PM Suga's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to committing his administration to make a vaccine available free of charge to everyone in Japan as early as possible in the new year, he has stressed the importance of overcoming weaknesses in Japan's provision of government online services and the insufficient use of digital technology by the private sector exposed by COVID-19. Dr. Curtis added that PM Suga is planning to establish a new Digital Technology Agency early in 2021 and make regulatory reforms to support telework, online medical consultations, and online classes. Additionally, his government is taking concerted actions to limit and eliminate as much as possible the use of *hanko*, personal seals that are regularly required in place of a signature on documents and that cannot be transmitted electronically. Dr. Curtis then noted that when the COVID-19 crisis erupted the government decided to approve online medical consultations as a temporary measure. PM Suga's policy is to make online consultations between patient and doctor a permanent feature of the health care system. Dr. Curtis questioned how successful the Japan Medical Association will be in limiting, if not in preventing, this change from taking place.

Lastly, Dr. Curtis remarked that regulatory reforms that challenge vested interests are easy to propose but difficult to implement. Online educational and medical services, the expansion of health insurance coverage for infertility treatments, and policies to drastically reduce the need for hard paper documents in favor of electronic versions are certain to be resisted by groups who see their interests threatened by such reforms and by LDP Diet members beholden to these interest groups for financial and campaign support.

PM Suga's and LDP Politics

Following Dr. Curtis's remarks on COVID-19, he transitioned to discuss how PM Suga's position as prime minister has already set him at a crossroads in terms of his future reelection. Dr. Curtis began by highlighting PM Suga's ability to hold onto the support of nearly all the party's factional groups over the coming months will depend on how successful he is in mobilizing public support behind his reforms and in favor of his continuing in office beyond next September. Without enthusiastic public support, LDP politicians with close ties to interest groups opposed to reform will be emboldened to resist his policies. Dr. Curtis stated that for PM Suga to succeed, he needs to be bold, unafraid of antagonizing politicians who Prime Minister Koizumi used to refer to as the "resistance forces" in the LDP. Moreover, without a strong factional base or the time, given the need to face a party presidential election next September, PM Suga cannot succeed by pursuing a traditional consensus-building approach within the LDP. Dr. Curtis noted that many parts of PM Suga's policy agenda, including reducing mobile phone plan costs, expanding digitalization, promoting inward bound tourism, and continuing Japan's Go-To program can gain public approval. But PM Suga so far has not offered an overarching vision or a long-term strategy that provides context for these and other policies. Here, Dr. Curtis added that PM Suga's decision to purge 6 of the 115 nominees for membership on Japan's Science Council has produced intense criticism that has been reflected in a substantial decline in support for him as measured by public opinion polls and attacks on him by the opposition parties. By breaking with the practice of having the prime minister automatically appoint the nominees presented by the Council, Dr. Curtis stated that PM Suga opened himself to criticism that he was punishing the six purged nominees because they had vocally opposed PM Abe's administration national security policies and its anti-conspiracy legislation. PM Suga denies that he rejected them because of their political views but has refused to explain his reasons for not appointing them. Overall, Dr. Curtis noted that this is a no-win situation for Suga and that when a leader finds himself in a hole he needs to stop digging and figure out how to extricate himself. But rather than cutting his losses, PM Suga has dug in his heels. Overall, Dr. Curtis remarked that this has kept the issue alive and made it the focus of opposition attacks on him in the Diet. In so doing it is causing serious damage to his reputation and is making it difficult for him to get the public to focus attention on his reform agenda.

PM Suga's Foreign Policy

Next, Dr. Curtis addressed PM Suga's foreign policy. He first explained PM Suga's former position as PM Abe's Chief Cabinet Secretary. As PM Abe's Chief Cabinet Secretary, in this position, PM Suga was present at the table with PM Abe when major foreign policy decisions were being discussed. However, Dr. Curtis noted that PM Suga has no experience negotiating with foreign governments and as Chief Cabinet Secretary focused his energies on domestic policy matters. Dr. Curtis added that in terms of Abenomics and domestic policy, PM Suga is hewing closely to the first two arrows of Abenomics, those concerned with monetary and fiscal policy, and is emphasizing pushing harder and further with the third arrow of structural reform. On foreign policy, he is following the strategy and the priorities laid down by PM Suga and relying on bureaucratic expertise and the advice of LDP leaders well versed on international matters. Dr. Curtis stated that shortly after becoming prime minister, PM Suga made his first trip abroad, visiting Vietnam and Indonesia. In doing so he was following the example set by PM Abe who made his first trip after becoming prime minister at the end of 2012 also to Vietnam and Indonesia. PM Abe also visited Thailand on that trip, something PM Suga also would have done was it not for the unstable political situation that prevails there. Outside of the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Dr. Curtis noted that PM Suga can be expected to continue to support close relationships with the Quad countries (Australia, India, and the U.S.), pursue regional and extra-regional trade agreements, and most important of all continue to strengthen the U.S.-Japan alliance as the cornerstone of Japan's security strategy. Dr. Curtis added that issues such as defense cost-sharing and trade policy may well become the object of intense negotiation but that it is inconceivable they would lead to a rupture that would do serious damage to the alliance. Dr. Curtis remarked that the reality is that maintaining the U.S.-Japan alliance is in the vital national interest of both countries and will grow only stronger and more important in the coming years. The most important and difficult issue for the U.S. and Japan that PM Suga will have to deal with is how to manage relations with China. Dr. Curtis stated that PM Suga will no doubt seek to maintain PM Abe's policy of strengthening relations with the U.S. on the one hand while deepening political, economic, and cultural relations with China on the other.

Concluding Remarks

In his concluding remarks, Dr. Curtis stressed that it is too early to predict how PM Suga's administration will fair. His election as prime minister was enthusiastically greeted by the public. In the first post-election Nikkei poll his support was 74%.

Dr. Curtis stated that PM Suga made quick progress in realizing a few of his reforms and is pushing ahead with others. But in less than two months after being elected, his popularity has declined significantly in part because of criticism of his failure so far to present a compelling vision and strategy designed to achieve it and his handling of the Science Council issue. It is clear that the skill set required to be a powerful chief cabinet secretary, as identified by Dr. Curtis, is not the same as that needed to be a successful prime minister. The next few months will tell the world whether he has those necessary skills. Dr. Curtis's conclusion was by stating that he hopes PM Suga will be successful as his success would mean a stronger Japanese economy and political stability. The last thing Japan needs is a return to a pattern of rapidly changing prime ministers.

Moderated Q&A with Attendees

The first question was from Dr. Paul Sheard, Research Fellow at the Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Business and Government, Harvard Kennedy School. Dr. Sheard asked Dr. Curtis for his thoughts on whether PM Suga is a traditional LDP politician and, if so, how this will affect his leadership. He also asked whether PM Suga has a banner reform issue. In response, Dr. Curtis discussed three points. First, the COVID-19 pandemic has made certain reforms more possible to be accomplished quickly, such as digitalization because the public is now more convinced of its importance. Secondly, Dr. Curtis noted that PM Suga does not fit the profile of a traditional LDP politician. He does not belong to a LDP faction, he comes neither from a family that has been involved in politics or from a career in the national bureaucracy. He is elected from an urban district, Yokohama, but lived in rural Akita prefecture until graduating high school and still has deep attachments there. However, Dr. Curtis noted that while PM Suga is not in this sense a traditional LDP politician, Dr. Curtis is concerned that PM Suga appears to be taking a traditional LDP approach to exercising power, looking to build a consensus among the party leaders and not having a strategy to rally public support to pressure the LDP to support his reform agenda. Dr. Curtis recommended that PM Suga needs to be more like PM Koizumi, rallying public support and standing strong against vested interests and their LDP supporters if he hopes to win the LDP presidential election next September and remain as prime minister for longer than one year.

The next question came from Mr. Jim Schoff, Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Mr. Schoff asked Dr. Curtis if PM Suga has an affinity for defense issues or will PM Suga leave these issues to the bureaucracy since PM Suga has already had to deal with high-profile issues such as the Aegis Ashore and F2 project.

Dr. Curtis responded by saying that defense issues are not PM Suga's main area of expertise or interest and that he will rely on the expertise of the National Security Council (NSC) and foreign and defense ministries. Dr. Curtis also stressed that PM Suga is very intelligent and a good listener who can absorb new information and act on it responsibly and decisively.

Moving from defense to environmental security topics, Dr. Phillip Lipsky, Associate Professor at the University of Toronto, asked Dr. Curtis for his thoughts on PM Suga's recent announcement that Japan would have net-zero carbon emissions by 2050 and whether or not this was a sign that younger generation LDP members were influencing policy. In response, Dr. Curtis stated that PM Abe already suggested an 80% reduction by 2050, that Chinese President Xi Jinping has promised a 90% reduction by 2060, and that the United States is committed to a zero-carbon economy also by 2050. Therefore, Dr. Curtis remarked that Japan is jumping on the carbon-neutral bandwagon and that this goal is welcomed but questioned how Japan will get from here to zero in 30 years has yet to be explained. Politically though Dr. Curtis does not believe that becoming carbon-neutral in 30 years as the banner headline for his maiden Diet speech is something that is likely to get voters excited. PM Suga needs to figure out how to get headlines about what he is planning to achieve while he is the prime minister.

Next, Dr. Thomas Cynkin, Director of Development and External Affairs at the Bush School of Government and Public Service, asked a question about what role PM Suga's Chief Cabinet Secretary Katsunobu Kato will have in the administration. First, Dr. Curtis responded by stating that Kato's main job is complete loyalty to PM Suga and be the government's spokesperson. With that in mind, Dr. Curtis noted that he does not see PM Suga carving out a space for Kato in the policy arena for him to lead on an issue. Kato is an accomplished bureaucrat now in politics and ambitious for higher office. He has already shown his credentials as a policy expert. Overall, Dr. Curtis stated that with Kato's position as Chief Cabinet Secretary, this gives him the opportunity to demonstrate his ability to be the backstage manager for PM Suga as he was for PM Abe.

On the topic of the Suga administration, Dr. Adam Liff, Associate Professor at Indiana University, asked Dr. Curtis to address the dynamics between PM Suga and negotiations with Komeito, the LDP's coalition partner. In response, Dr. Curtis stated that PM Suga may take a less aggressive approach to security and defense policies than PM Abe, a stance that would please the Komeito which was uncomfortable with PM Abe's efforts to stretch the meaning of Article Nine and was an important restraining factor. Overall, Dr. Curtis remarked that on the topic of reform, he does not foresee serious conflict between PM Suga and the Komeito.

However, PM Suga has a very close relationship with the leaders of *Nippon Ishin no Kai* (Japan Innovation Party). Dr. Curtis noted that if PM Suga were to draw *Ishin no Kai* into the governing coalition, it would dilute Komeito's influence. So while PM Suga needs to be respectful of Komeito's views, the Komeito for its part needs to avoid antagonizing the prime minister.

Next, Dr. Akimoto asked Dr. Curtis where PM Suga's stands regarding the promotion of women and diversity. In response, Dr. Curtis stated that he is not really for sure if PM Suga stands anywhere on pushing issues relating to women and diversity, though of course, he will say all the appropriate things about the importance of gender equality and greater diversity. Although it is driven by a concern about Japan's declining population and not out of a desire to promote diversity, Dr. Curtis noted that PM Suga has been a strong proponent of expanding and liberalizing Japan's guest worker programs. Dr. Curtis added that once COVID-19 is conquered he expects that PM Suga will push hard for more liberalization. Though "immigration" is still considered a taboo word in Japan, the Suga administration is going to encourage an immigration policy that is called something else. As for women, Dr. Curtis stated that it would behoove PM Suga to give more attention to opening more opportunities for women since they constitute half of the nation's voters,

Vice Admiral Yoji Koda, former Commander in Chief of the Japanese Self Defense Fleet, next asked a question regarding PM Suga's foreign policy, especially concerning China. Vice Admiral Koda asked Dr. Curtis for his opinion on what the most suitable China policy is for Japan that would support the U.S. trade war with China while also enabling Japan to pursue its own independent goals with regards to China. In response, Dr. Curtis first recounted PM Abe's success in balancing Japan's alliance with the United States and Japan's desire to improve relations with China. Throughout his administration, PM Abe emphasized close economic and cultural relations with China while also having a consistent attitude of firm resolve on security issues and on strengthening the U.S.- Japan security relationship. Given PM Abe's success, Dr. Curtis said he expects PM Suga to pursue the same course, the unknown being whether and how U.S. China policy may change depending on the outcome of the U.S. presidential election. Dr. Curtis stated that if Biden is elected, there is likely to be an effort to have a more nuanced policy toward China, one that combines a tough line on security and technology issues while looking for areas of cooperation on regional and global issues like climate change.

Next, Dr. Mireya Solis, Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution, had two questions for Dr. Curtis. The first was whether Dr. Curtis thinks that PM Abe can play a leading role in PM Suga's administration as an envoy, and the second was regarding Dr. Curtis's thoughts on where Japan's democracy is heading.

To the first question, Dr. Curtis stated that he hopes PM Suga will rely heavily upon PM Abe for both advice on foreign policy matters and as an envoy for communication with global leaders. As PM Abe is highly respected worldwide, Dr. Curtis thinks there is a high possibility PM Suga will reach out to him for his advice and his service as an envoy. For Dr. Solis's second question, Dr. Curtis highlighted that the perennial problem confronting Japanese democracy is the weakness of the opposition. Even so, respect for democratic procedures is strong and, as this has been seen in the public's reaction to PM Suga's handling of nominees to the Science Council which has shown there is strong support for traditional Japanese democratic norms. Overall, Dr. Curtis noted that there are stresses and strains on democratic performance in Japan, as there are in other democratic countries but Japan is a consolidated democracy that is not in danger of weakening substantially.

The last question of the Q&A was asked by Dr. Akimoto. He asked for Dr. Curtis's thoughts on the general LDP culture of bringing up the next generation of leaders and whether or not PM Suga has shown any interest in following this tradition. In response, Dr. Curtis stated that while PM Suga has kept younger politicians such as Kono Taro, Kato Katsunobu, Nishimura Yasutoshi, Toshimitsu Motegi, and Shinjiro Koizumi in important cabinet positions, whether these politicians are going to be able to become the nation's top leader depends on their own talent and ambition and not on mentoring by PM Suga. As for PM Suga himself, his primary challenge, as identified by Dr. Curtis, is to position himself to win next September's LDP presidential election. If he concludes before then that his chances of being elected are not good he may say that his goal has been to be a transitional leader opening the way for the next generation and gracefully back out of contesting the election. Concluding, Dr. Curtis stated that it is just too early to see how PM Suga's administration is going to play out.

Sasakawa USA is grateful to Dr. Curtis, Dr. Sunami, Q&A participants, and attendees for the thoughtful discussion on PM Suga's administration.

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