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Next Japanese PM Meets With U.S. Ambassador

Japan's newly elected Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama met with the new U.S. ambassador to Japan John Roos on September 3, just four days after leading the Democrat Party of Japan to victory over the Liberal Democratic Party, which has governed Japan for more than 50 years.

The party won 308 of the 480 seats in the lower house of the Diet, Japan's legislature. The Democrats hold 117 of the 240 seats in the upper house, requiring a coalition with a minor party to govern. Hatoyama will take office on September 16.



VOA News reported that Hatoyama said he had spoken to President Barack Obama by phone the previous day and that Obama "was pleased that Democrats in both countries had become the symbol for change."

"The Japan-U.S. alliance is the axis of Japan's foreign policies," Hatoyama told Roos during the meeting, according to a statement released from Hatoyama's office. "We would like to further enhance the Japan-U.S. relationship."

"The talks were cordial," Hatoyama told reporters afterward. "I think we will have good relations."

AP news reported that Roos, after meeting with Hatoyama for about 40 minutes, described the meeting as "very warm," and said they discussed the "very deep relationship" between the countries. "We spent a lot of time talking about how to enhance and further deepen that relationship across a broad range of issues," Roos said in a statement.

Hatoyama's Democratic Party had campaigned on a platform of seeking a more "equal partnership" with the United States, as well as building closer ties with China and other Asian nations. However, prior to the election, an essay by Hatoyama, an English translation published in the *International Herald Tribune* and on the website of the *New York Times*, had labeled Japan's struggling economy as a victim of American-led globalization. During the campaign, Hatoyama had also said he would end Japan's refueling operations in the Indian Ocean in support of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, and questioned U.S. plans to relocate a Marine air station on the Japanese island of Okinawa.

The *Times* reported that American criticism of Hatoyama's essay received widespread coverage in major Japanese newspapers on September 3, with most editorials reflecting the prevailing belief among Japanese that their nation must remain a close ally of the United States, especially given the rise of China as an economic powerhouse and the prospect of a nuclear-armed North Korea nearby.

A Reuters news report of September 3 observed that Hatoyama also seeks to improve Japanese ties with Russia. Japan and Russia have never resolved their dispute over four Japanese islands (known as the Northern Territories in Japan and the Southern Kuril islands in Russia) seized by the Soviet Union in 1945.

"I told [Ambassador Bely] that it is important to build a trusting relationship between leaders to resolve



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pending problems such as territorial issues," Hatoyama told reporters after meeting Russian Ambassador to Japan, Mikhail Bely. The newly elected Japanese prime minister added that he would make efforts toward building such a relationship, noting: "The name, Hatoyama, is fortunately well-known in Russia, so I hope we can move forward to resolving issues facing the two countries."

Reuters noted that Hatoyama's grandfather, Ichiro Hatoyama, was the first Japanese prime minister to visit the Soviet Union and concluded the Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration in 1956, which officially ended the state of war existing since World War II and which restored diplomatic relations as negotiations for a peace treaty continued.

The newly elected prime minister comes from a long line of Japanese political leaders. His great-grandfather, Kazuo Hatoyama, was speaker of the House of Representatives from 1896 to 1897; his grandfather (noted above), Prime Minister Ichir Hatoyama, was a founder and the first president of the Japan Democratic Party; his father, Iichir Hatoyama, was once Japan's foreign minister. He and his brother Kunio co-founded the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) in 1996, largely using funds supplied by their mother, Yasuko Hatoyama, the daughter and heir of Shojiro Ishibashi, the founder of the giant Bridgestone tire corporation. The Hatoyamas have been called "Japan's Kennedy family."

The rise of Hatoyama and the Democrat Party of Japan (which the *New York Times* described as "slightly left-of-center") to power, following the recent ascendancy to the U.S. presidency of Democrat Barack Obama recalls a similar parallel between Japanese and U.S. politics back in the 1970s. Former Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka (who served from July 7, 1972 through December 9, 1974) presided over a foreign policy that closely resembled that of the Nixon administration, and — like Nixon — his most notable (or infamous) achievement was the normalization of Japan's relations with the People's Republic of China.

President Nixon, of course, rather than face impeachment as a result of the Watergate scandals, resigned from office on August 9, 1974. The activities that became known as Watergate were first reported in the *Washington Post* by reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, whose primary source was an FBI informant known as "Deep Throat."

Similarly, Tanaka's troubles began in October 1974, when the Japanese magazine *Bungei Shunju* ran an article critical of some of Tanaka's questionable business practices, prompting Tanaka's political rivals in the Liberal Democratic Party to begin a public inquiry in the Diet. Among the practices cited in the exposé was Tanaka's purchase of a geisha and subsequent use of her name for a number of questionable land deals in Tokyo during the 1960s.

The Diet commission called as its first witness the treasurer of a group called Etsuzankai (which played a role in Tanaka's campaign similar to Nixon's Committee to Re-elect the President, which had initiated the break-in at the Democratic campaign headquarters in the Watergate hotel) named Aki Sato. Unknown to the committee members, Sato and Tanaka had been involved in a romantic relationship for several years. Rather than let her take the stand, he announced his resignation on November 26, 1974.

While the scandals involved may have been different in nature, bear in mind that in politics, scandals are often employed selectively to remove from power those politicians who have failed to cooperate with more powerful figures behind the scenes.

If Tanaka was Japan's version of Richard Nixon, will Hatoyama become Japan's Barack Obama?

Stranger coincidences have happened.



Photo of Yukio Hatoyama: AP Images



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