

Japan's faction fight: the key to Asia's future

by Richard Katz

The power struggle that erupted in Japan last week could become the single most important factor in determining the fate of East Asia, including the stability of Korea and whether a military alliance between Japan, China and the United States will be formed.

By siding with an opposition no-confidence vote last week and forcing the resignation of the cabinet of premier Masayoshi Ohira, former premiers Takeo Miki and Takeo Fukuda have opened the door to a possible dramatic change in Japanese leadership and policy. Whether Ohira is fully dumped from power and a Japanese foreign policy shift occurs will largely be determined by the actions Miki and Fukuda take over the course of the election campaign leading to the June 22 polling.

Former premier Miki, who is particularly sensitive to the danger of war, together with Fukuda, has been engaged in a bitter struggle with Ohira for more than six months. Throughout his stay in office, Ohira has abandoned traditional Japanese caution on military matters and has strongly supported the Carter administration's provocative policy of linking China, Japan and the United States in a military bloc against the Soviet Union. In fact, Ohira's commitment to Carter during a recent visit to Washington that Japan will increase defense spending in cooperation with the United States was one of the main issues in the no-confidence motion.

Despite the Miki-Fukuda action however, it is by no means certain that Ohira will be ousted from power. Violating all norms of Japanese tradition, Ohira is now refusing to take responsibility by resigning his post as president of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Ohira plans to maintain his grip on the LDP through the June elections, and hopes a victory for the party at that time will enable him to stay in power.

The election will be determined by whether Miki and Fukuda abandon the "back room" maneuvers that have failed to dislodge Ohira in the past, and instead move to

end Ohira's career through a public campaign against his policies.

"Everyone wants him out"

Opposition to Ohira has been steadily building in Japan for some time. Ohira's failure to procure oil for vulnerable Japan, the rising military tensions in Asia, and widespread skepticism about the sanity of the Carter administration, all contributed to undermining Ohira's rule. Miki and Fukuda, however, went beyond all bounds of precedent in joining with the Opposition to allow a vote of no-confidence to succeed against Ohira. Never before has the unity of the LDP been broken and its rule threatened in this way. As one Japan watcher commented, "it has ended an era in Japanese politics." The political situation is so volatile that Miki and Fukuda are reportedly considering leaving the LDP and forming a new party.

Whether or not they bolt, Miki and Fukuda are in a fight to the finish with Ohira. As LDP President, Ohira intends to use his control over party funds to deny campaign financing to members of the Miki and Fukuda factions and move to strengthen his own power within the LDP. Should the LDP win in June, Ohira will attempt to claim this as a mandate for his own continued rule. If the LDP should lose its narrow majority, then a coalition with some of the Opposition parties, such as the Democratic Socialist and the Buddhist Komeito parties would become likely. In the latter case Ohira might form a coalition with these parties and continue in power, or the Miki-Fukuda alliance might find themselves at the head of an unstable Italian-style coalition government constantly threatened with breakup and paralyzing any policy initiatives.

In this situation, Ohira's "rule or ruin" strategy has given him a certain position of strength relative to Miki and Fukuda. Thus, it is critical for them to battle openly against Ohira on the issues of Japan's economy and national security, while campaigning for a victory of the LDP.

Up to this point, Ohira has remained in power largely because the political and business leadership of Japan has developed no clear alternative to Ohira's "no choice but ties with Carter at all costs" policy. It is known that a number of business leaders, the most important constituency of the LDP, have urged Ohira in private to resign on the grounds that his continued presence undermines political calm in Tokyo. A decision by them to contrast Fukuda's 1978 war-avoidance alliance with Germany and good relations with OPEC to Ohira's wrecking of the economy and the peace of Asia would be the only basis of rallying the now-cynical voters of Japan to the idea to both strengthening the LDP and removing Ohira.