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EDITORIAL

Back to the future for Japan?

As the new year kicks off and the coalition government of the Liberal Democratic Party and Komeito gets into full swing, Japan will see a drastic change in the direction of policies set by the DPJ government during its rule of three years and three months. It will not be a new direction, however, but rather largely a revival of the policy direction that Prime Minister Shinzo Abe adopted — or tried to adopt — during his first administration from September 2006 to September 2007.

People will likely soon feel the effects of the new Abe administration's policies, but it is unclear whether his approach to the economy will improve their lives.

Due to Mr. Abe's economic policy, which calls for unlimited monetary easing by the Bank of Japan, financial markets may show positive signs. But the nation's poorest citizens will likely face greater hardships due to the Abe administration's social policy, which embraces the conservative idea of "self-help."

On the diplomatic front, the Abe administration's hawkish stance on issues involving the Constitution, national security and historical perspectives may increase friction in Northeast Asia. The Abe administration may leave these issues on the back burner before next summer's Upper House election.

But it must not be forgotten that Mr. Abe's top goal is to revise the Constitution's war-renouncing Article 9. He aims to win the Upper House election so that the LDP, together with other parties sharing similar ideological ground, can lay the foundation for constitutional change. Given his nationalistic call for changing the "postwar regime," Mr. Abe's policies could change the basic character of postwar Japan and raise suspicions in the international community regarding its true intentions.

The nation's policy toward nuclear power generation will likely also change, reflecting the LDP's close ties with the power industry. The Abe administration is expected to scrap the DPJ administration's policy to end Japan's reliance on nuclear power generation in the 2030s.

Trade and industry minister Mr. Toshimitsu Motegi said the new government will seek to restart offline nuclear power plants once the Nuclear Regulatory Authority releases new post-Fukushima safety standards in July. He also hinted that the government will reverse the DPJ government's decision not to approve the construction of new nuclear power plants, and made it clear that the government will not abandon the nuclear fuel cycle project.

The Abe administration's position on nuclear power generation is extremely regrettable considering the fact that the catastrophe at Tokyo Electric Power Co.'s Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant, which contaminated vast areas with radioactive substances and forced hundreds of thousands of residents to evacuate — including some 160,000 local residents who still cannot return home — made it clear that operating nuclear power plants in this earthquake-prone country is inherently dangerous.

Japan's nuclear fuel cycle project has stalled, with the Monju fast-breeder reactor remaining inoperative despite years of work, and the spent nuclear fuel

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The incoming Abe administration faces a host of issues. What do you think Japan should focus on most intently in 2013?

- More family-friendly work initiatives to keep women in the workforce.**
- Serious progress with post-tsunami reconstruction in Tohoku.**
- Monetary policy that keeps the yen at a healthy exchange level.**
- The aggressive pursuit of alternative energy sources.**
- Diplomatic strategies that ease tensions with Asian neighbors.**
- The settlement of the Futenma issue.**

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reprocessing plant in Rokkasho, Aomori Prefecture, plagued by a series of accidents. A decision to continue the project makes no sense and is deplorable from both an ethical and safety standpoint. Nuclear waste storage facilities are nearly full now, and technology to safely store high-level radioactive waste permanently does not exist. Mr. Abe must understand that continuing nuclear power generation in Japan will create serious environmental problems for future generations.

Mr. Abe speaks much about the BOJ setting an inflation target of 2 percent, but says very little about measures aimed at increasing employment and wages. His policy risks fueling inflation that is not accompanied by economic gains that will improve people's living standards. He should come up with measures that will increase investment in industries closely related to local communities such as agriculture, tourism, medical- and nursing-care services and child-rearing support, as well as eco-friendly industries including the development of green energy sources.

The Abe administration has signaled a clear departure from the DPJ administration in social policy. The LDP has been playing up reports of misuse of livelihood assistance for the poor — the last layer in Japan's social safety net — and is considering lowering livelihood assistance benefits by up to 10 percent in line with the conservative "self-help" ideology it advocates. The LDP must realize that the vast majority of those who rely on social welfare assistance do so because they cannot find work. Only an estimated 0.3 to 0.4 percent of the budget for livelihood assistance is misused. The government should avoid adopting a policy that will make the already tough lives of the nation's poorest citizens even harder.

On the diplomatic front, the Abe administration is likely to review or change the 1993 statement issued by then Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono on "comfort women," who provided sex to members of the Imperial armed forces during the wars of the 1930s and '40s. The statement acknowledged that the Japanese military was "directly or indirectly involved in the establishment and management of the comfort stations and the transfer of comfort women." Revising this statement could cause great repercussions not only in Asia but also in other parts of the world if it is viewed as an attempt by Japan to whitewash its militarist past.

Such a move would indicate that Japan has become inward-looking and could lead to its isolation in the international community. Mr. Abe should realize that a revision of the Kono Statement would harm Japan's national interests, and leave it intact.

Citizens should closely monitor the policies of the Abe administration and make their displeasure known if it tries to adopt policies that will make their lives more difficult or undermine Japan's dedication to pacifism, which has earned it the respect and trust of the international community.

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