

Makiko Tanaka returns to political prominence in Japan

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At the November 19 opening session of the newly elected Japanese parliament, the former foreign minister Makiko Tanaka formally aligned herself with the main opposition Democratic Party (DPJ) against the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi.

According to media reports, she was personally invited to join the DPJ parliamentary group by its leader Naoto Kan. While she has not become a member of the DPJ, she will support its policies and vote alongside its members. The DPJ in return will facilitate her speaking and asking questions from the floor of parliament. Kan told the media he expected Tanaka to cooperate with or “even lead” the opposition efforts to replace the LDP-led government.

In her opening broadside against Koizumi and his policies, Tanaka told a throng of reporters outside the parliament that Japanese domestic politics had “not changed at all” under his administration and denounced the government’s intention to deploy troops to assist the US occupation of Iraq as “absurd”.

The November 9 election saw the LDP’s majority reduced, in part due to opposition to sending Japanese forces to the Middle East and the DPJ’s criticisms of Koizumi’s slow pace of economic restructuring. The ruling party won 237 seats, while the DPJ won 177, its largest ever tally of seats. The election also demonstrated that much of the population is alienated from both the major parties. Turnout in the election was barely 60 percent.

Tanaka will bring to the DPJ a significant base of support among the urban middle class and younger Japanese. The daughter of former prime minister and political powerbroker Kakeui Tanaka, she was perhaps the best-known politician in Japan by the end of the 1990s. Using her family wealth and the media, she

promoted radical free market measures to resurrect Japan’s stagnant economy and built her reputation with fiery denunciations of the bureaucratic and ossified LDP leadership. Tanaka also advocated a lessening of Japan’s postwar security dependence on the US and called for Tokyo to develop closer ties with China and other neighbours, such as South Korea and Russia.

In the April 2001 LDP leadership contest, Koizumi successfully enlisted Tanaka’s support for his bid to take control of the ruling party from the dominant, largely protectionist factions. After five LDP prime ministers in just seven years, she described Koizumi as the ruling party’s “last card” to restructure the economy. Her support assisted substantially in rallying the LDP rank-and-file behind Koizumi. In exchange for her backing, Tanaka was given the post of foreign minister and her presence in the cabinet was a factor in the phenomenon of “Koizumi-mania” which saw approval ratings for the prime minister reach over 80 percent.

However tensions racked Tanaka’s relations with Koizumi and the cabinet almost from the time it was formed. Her agenda of strengthening Japan’s relations with its neighbours cut across Koizumi’s promotion of Japanese nationalism and his embrace of the Bush administration’s calls for Japan to play a greater military role in Asia.

Tanaka publicly criticised Koizumi for affronting China and South Korea by visiting the Yasukuni Shrine to Japan’s war dead and for refusing to intervene to prevent the publication of history text books that apologised for Japanese colonialism in the first half of the 20th century. For her part, Tanaka came under fire for her criticism of the US national missile defence system, her alleged description of George Bush as an “arsehole” while in Germany and a statement

indicating her support for Taiwan's incorporation into China.

The foreign policy differences came to a head after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Koizumi and most of the LDP adopted a policy of full support for the US aggression in Afghanistan, and then the Middle East. Tanaka was muzzled and prevented throughout the final months of 2001 from representing Japan at any major international forum. Isolated within the LDP, she was ultimately sacked as foreign minister on January 30, 2002 over a dubious charge that she had misled parliament. Corruption allegations that she had misused public funds came next. A media campaign in the pro-Koizumi press, especially the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, successfully pressured her to resign from parliament in August 2002.

While a member of the cabinet, Tanaka was blocked from speaking openly in opposition to the Bush administration's "war on terrorism". In March this year, however, Tanaka authored an opinion piece in the *Japan Times* that made clear her differences with Koizumi's support for US aggression. While indicating a general agreement with the US-Japan alliance, she called for a foreign policy that "would have the courage to disagree with the US" and for Japan to "deliver a clear message to the US—exercise patience to avoid war".

On the eve of the Iraq war, Tanaka's views were barely reported by the Japanese press. Nor did the DPJ highlight her remarks. Indeed, as recently as a few months ago it appeared that her political career was effectively over. She was not finally cleared of possible criminal charges until September. Her continuing popularity, however, was demonstrated in the election. Tanaka easily won back her former seat in parliament—one of the safest LDP seats in the country—standing as an independent against the LDP.

The DPJ is now seeking to take advantage of her return to political prominence under conditions of widespread opposition to sending Japanese troops to Iraq and mounting concerns within the Japanese political establishment over the wisdom of Koizumi's backing of the Bush administration. Japan has promised troops and pledged \$US5 billion to help finance the US occupation, undermining Tokyo's relations with China and Middle Eastern states. A variety of trade conflicts are flaring between the US and Japan, further

strengthening the position of those like Tanaka who are calling for more distance from Washington.

In the Machiavellian world of Japanese politics, the opposition calculates that conflicts within the government coalition over Iraq could trigger the defection of LDP legislators sympathetic to Tanaka's foreign policy. The loss of even a few dozen LDP legislators could be enough to convince the New Komeito party, which holds 34 seats in the new parliament, to form a coalition government with the DPJ instead of the LDP.

Conflicts over economic policy or heavy losses for the LDP in the upper house election due in mid-2004 could be other triggers. The DPJ is already preparing to use Tanaka as one of its main campaigners over the coming months in attacking Koizumi. A DPJ spokesman told the *Asahi Shimbun*: "She [Tanaka] will have a great impact if she supports campaigns on her anti-Koizumi, anti-LDP line. She has that kind of destructive power."



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