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Daniil Romanenko

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Japan's Defense Spending Approval and the Political Party Dynamics

The discussions on the supplemental budget bill during the 216 extraordinary Japan's National Diet session (November-December 2024) has revealed a certain pattern of interactions between the Japanese political parties.

The understanding of these patterns will help to predict the course of deliberations during the 217 Diet session that began recently, on January 20. For that reason let us see what did the supplemental budget bill debates of December 2024 demonstrated in the context of party dynamics.

Oppositional Parties and Their Goals

The formerly ruling coalition (before the elections of 27 October 2024) of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Komeito is now in the minority (220/465 seats) and has to negotiate with the opposition parties to achieve its goals. What did the opponents of the LDP want?

The biggest opposition force, the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP, 148/465 seats), traditionally fights the LDP; it seeks to strengthen the social support of the population and to avoid increasing the defense budget. In December 2024 it strived to increase government spending on disaster recovery. The LDP agreed with the CDP's proposal to provide financial support for the Noto Peninsula which is recovering from the earthquake of 1 January 2024. Still, that was not enough to convince the CDP to approve the budget, as the LDP did not budge on other matters important to the CDP.

Democratic Party for the People (DPFP, 28/465 seats) is a center-right party, agreeing with the LDP in terms of security and defense policy but refusing to ally with the formerly ruling

party, disagreeing on other issues. Particularly, in December the DPFP demanded to raise the annual income tax exemption from 1.03 million yen to 1.78 million yen. In the end, DPFP and LDP came to a compromise on this issue: the annual income tax exemption was raised to 1.23 million yen with the promise to return to this issue later on.

Ishin no Kai (a.k.a. Japan Innovation Party; 38/465 seats) promotes the idea of governance decentralization, strives to fight corruption in politics, and introduces free access to education on all levels. The last topic was brought up by Ishin no Kai in December and discussed with the LDP-Komeito coalition. The latter stated that larger financial resources are needed and such a decision should be thoroughly planned without a rush. Still, Ishin no Kai supported the budget bill, probably to soften the LDP and Komeito for further negotiations on the problem of free education (or because the coalition gave a promise to consider this topic in return for Ishin no Kai's support on a budget decision).

So what was the important goal for which the LDP needed to sway the opposition? The answer was in the title of this article: one of the key goals, in my opinion, was the defense budget.

Defense Budget

The LDP has been aiming to increase Japan's defense budget to 2% since the Fumio Kishida's administration. This move would be symbolic as in that way Japan's spending on defense will become the same as expected from the NATO members. Thus, from the LDP's perspective, a defense budget increase would not only strengthen Japan amidst the rising foreign threats but would also demonstrate Japan's support of its alliance with the US. In that context, it was probably seen as important for the LDP to increase defense spending right before the meeting between Ishiba Shigeru and Donald Trump. The Japanese PM wanted to meet Trump before his inauguration, in mid-January 2025, and one reason for this rush could have been the defense budget: the leaders were to meet before this move of the LDP loses relevance. Still, later Ishiba ruled out pre-inauguration meeting with Trump, the leaders will probably meet in February 2025.

As a result, out of 115.5 trillion yen of supplementary budget, 8.6 trillion yen were spent on defense. The proposal was met negatively by the CDP and the Communist Party. The latter criticized the budget proposal for allocating large amounts of money to military purposes and support for large corporations while providing insufficient support for the lives of the people. For instance, Noto revitalization spending was more than three times smaller than spending on defense. Moreover, the government will have to issue 28.6 trillion yen of government bonds to finance the supplementary budget. That is, around 25% of the

budget has to be covered by bonds, which raises concerns about the financial sustainability of the country (and the need to promote such a large defense spending while the economy is not in the best shape).

Current Dynamics in the Diet

The supplementary budget was enacted on December 17, and the LDP, Komeito, Ishin no Kai, and DPFP voiced their support, while CDP, Communist Party, and other parties were against the bill. Thus the events of December 2024 demonstrated the pattern that has been predicated by many analytics since 27 October 2024 House of Representatives elections: right now LDP and Komeito have two potential allies – Ishin no Kai and DPFP. The coalition has already managed to sway both parties with its promises and thus to pass the supplementary budget. During the next Diet session, LDP will need at least one of these parties' support to promulgate the budget by March 31. Thus the coalition will need to take steps either towards the income tax exemption raise or the free education. Either way, the coalition has demonstrated that it can achieve its goals even being in the minority. One of the key questions of the 2026 FY budget will be defense spending. If other opposition forces were not able to convince Ishin no Kai and DPFP to oppose LDP, the story would probably repeat itself: the defense spending would increase to please the US and other Western allies of Japan, and the economic and social spheres would not be emphasized as much as they could've been, thus worsening the economic crisis and reducing public support for the forces in power.

Daniil Romanenko, January 26, 2025

Daniil Romanenko, japanologist, researcher from the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences