Walking a Fine Line? Coalition Politics and the Komeito's Influence on Security Policy

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Before the 2014 debate on Collective Self-Defense in the Japanese Diet, scholars wondered what position the Komeito would come down on in the debate. In April of 2014, Yakushiji Katsuyuki of the Tokyo Foundation wondered if the Komeito "would stand up to Prime Minister Abe, or will it put its relationship with the LDP ahead of its principles, as it has so often in the past?" In the end, the Komeito did not outright block the Cabinet's Decision on recognizing the right of Collective Self-Defense. Instead, they modified the wording to put limits on the reinterpretation of the constitution by the Cabinet.

The behavior of the Komeito to simply modify the decision presents several puzzles. Why is the party that was founded by the pacifist Soka Gakkai content to modify defense policy instead of outright opposing it? At the same time, as the junior member of a coalition with the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) that currently holds 55 seats in the Diet to the LDP's 406, why is the Komeito able to have such a strong influence on defense policy?

This paper argues that the Komeito *is able* and *chooses* to modify but not outright oppose LDP defense policy because both parties benefit from inter-party cooperation: pre-election cooperation agreements and cooperation on passing laws as coalition partners. The Komeito holds leverage over the LDP for four reasons:

(1) In order to maximize the number of LDP seats and get legislation it wants passed, the LDP is incentivized to make a coalition with a party that can give them a supermajority in the Diet.
(2) The LDP needs voters from another party in addition to their own supporters in order to maintain its competitive edge in single-member districts.
(3) There are no other parties that can guarantee the same consistent support to the LDP that the Komeito provides. Therefore, the LDP must compromise with the Komeito. However, I also add a fourth point of leverage, not directly related to electoral cooperation:
(4) The Komeito provides political cover for controversial defense decisions.

The LDP also holds leverage over the Komeito for two reasons:

(1) Under the Mixed System of Single-Member and Proportional-Representation Districts election system implemented in 1996, it is difficult for a small party with a set number of voters like the Komeito to compete in single-member districts. The pre-election agreements allow the Komeito to partially overcome this hurdle and increase their numbers.

(2) Being part of the coalition government allows the Komeito to claim to its supporters that it has greater influence on policy decisions.

The Komeito's stable support for the LDP gives them leverage over the LDP on defense policy. The Komeito leverage is, of course, not without its limitations. The junior coalition member of a governing coalition could not outright oppose a central piece of legislation the senior coalition partner was determined to pass without breaking the coalition. Their disagreements with the LDP on security legislation have left them open to criticism from the right. Before the 2014 election, a number of right wing Internet bloggers suggested the LDP abandon the coalition with the Komeito and instead make a pact with the Party for Future Generations, who shared more in common on security policy. In addition, that the Komeito has as many as 9 seats in the Single Member Districts is thanks to their ability to run unopposed by the LDP in those districts and gain the votes of LDP supporters.

However, the LDP still needs the consistent voting bloc the Komeito provides to push their candidates over the top and help the party maintain dominance in numbers in the Diet. That the LDP caved so easily to the Komeito on casino legalization, despite more than sufficient numbers for the LDP and their allies to get the legislation passed, suggests that the LDP must save its precious political capital for battles it considers of highest priority, including defense legislation.