



## **U.S.-Japan: Why So Nervous?**

*By Ralph A. Cossa*

The U.S.-Japan relationship is on solid ground and growing stronger by the day! As a result of their recent Camp David summit, U.S. President George W. Bush and Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo have become one another's new best friend – perhaps not as close (yet) as Bush's ties with Abe's predecessor, "Elvis" Koizumi, but certainly close enough to allay a lot of the fears that have existed about the end of the "special relationship" following Koizumi's departure last fall. So, why does everyone in Japan appear to be so nervous?

Recent conversations with Japanese officials and leading scholars both in Tokyo and in the U.S. point to one central reason for rising apprehensions: fear of a new "Nixon shock" – the surprise 1972 rapprochement between China and the U.S. – this time concerning North Korea. The fears grow out of events surrounding the Feb. 13 Six-Party Talks "breakthrough" agreement which included, from a Japanese perspective (although the Japanese are decidedly not alone in this opinion), a surprising about face by Washington in dealing with North Korea; specifically Washington's seeming willingness to turn a blind eye to Pyongyang's illicit money-laundering and counterfeiting activities, in order to cut a denuclearization deal.

One can argue, as I have, that the trade-off, if it works – and we are still waiting for Pyongyang to live up to its end of the initial bargain – will be worth it. But it was the process that has Tokyo concerned – the suspected "secret handshake" between U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill and his North Korean counterpart, Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kye-gwan, in Berlin in mid-January that apparently made the February deal possible. (Hill maintains that there was no deal made in Berlin, and he did proceed to Tokyo to brief his Japanese counterparts on his discussions, but I have met few Japanese who fully believe this.) Bold headlines in Japan at the time of the U.S. policy reversal shouted "BETRAYAL." Officials are not quite this hysterical but seem equally upset. Until February, Washington and Tokyo seemed in lock step when it came to dealing with Pyongyang. While Washington claims both still are, many in Tokyo are not so sure.

Many in Japan worry, for instance, that Washington's emphasis on counter-proliferation – keeping nuclear material out of the hands of terrorists – may result in another secret handshake under which Pyongyang is allowed some ambiguity about its existing nuclear arsenal – the possibility of one or two "bombs in the basement" – in return for its plutonium and uranium-based production capabilities and any fissile material extracted from spent fuel rods since 2003. While most Japanese understand that counter-proliferation is

(and should be) the immediate concern, many feel that the denuclearization aspect is not sufficiently stressed. As one senior official told me: "You cannot emphasize too often and too much the ultimate goal of the negotiations: total dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear program. Immediate first steps (freeze, non-proliferation, etc.) are important, but they are only meaningful as steps towards the ultimate goal of complete, verifiable nuclear disarmament." The fact that there is no reference in the Feb. 13 agreement to existing weapons magnifies this concern.

One of Tokyo's biggest concerns is that the Feb. 13 agreement is not just about denuclearization. It also calls for normalization of relations between Washington and Pyongyang and between Tokyo and Pyongyang. Two independent sets of talks have commenced. Pyongyang's dialogue with Washington, while yet to achieve any real progress, has at least appeared constructive; its dialogue with Tokyo most decidedly has not. While the two sets of talks – and others aimed at denuclearization and at providing economic assistance to the North – are to proceed independently, all must magically be concluded together. This has Tokyo very worried. If the other pieces suddenly all fall into place, Tokyo would, at best, be seen as dragging the process down and, at worst, as preventing Korean Peninsula denuclearization.

True, Pyongyang's foot dragging in living up to its initial obligations under the Feb. 13 agreement has eased Tokyo's concerns somewhat, but it has also raised apprehensions about further U.S. concessions to keep the process alive. Meanwhile, Ambassador Hill's unbridled optimism – he still hopes the Feb. 13 agreement can be fully achieved by the end of the year sounds like a ticking clock to Tokyo, while raising concerns about new secret handshakes.

Japanese officials believe that an "understanding" exists today between Bush and Abe that no normalization of U.S. relations with North Korea will occur absent some "resolution" of the abductees issue – the disputed fate of Japanese citizens both confirmed and suspected to have been kidnapped by North Korea in the 1980s. North Korea claims the issue was resolved when it released the (by its account) sole surviving abductees. Tokyo suspects there are more and is demanding "full accountability," a politically charged and, if taken literally, unachievable milestone. Prime Minister Abe made his political reputation by standing tough on this issue.

It was the demand for "full accountability" that made normalization of relations between Washington and Hanoi impossible for several decades after the Vietnam War. Finally, and thanks largely to the effort of veterans like Senators John Kerry and former POW John McCain, the U.S. settled for "full cooperation." But there is no Kerry or McCain on the Japanese political horizon.

Privately, Japanese officials acknowledge that they will ultimately be forced to settle for "significant progress" but acknowledge there is no agreement among Japanese policymakers as to what this would entail. More importantly, there is no common definition between Washington and Tokyo of what constitutes "full cooperation" or "significant progress." It is (justifiably?) feared that the threshold may be considerably lower in a Bush administration that remains desperate for a foreign policy success than in a still hard-line Abe administration.

If another "Nixon shock" is to be avoided, Washington and Tokyo must agree today on a common definition of what constitutes sufficient progress on the abductees issue and this must be signaled to Pyongyang in no uncertain terms. A failure to do so could ultimately put the Feb. 13 agreement, or the alliance, or both, at risk.

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