



A Tale of Two Cities: Rising Concern in Japan About the Benefits of Alliance by Brad Glosserman

TOKYO — The conventional wisdom on the other side of the Pacific is that U.S.-Japan relations are the best they've ever been. The view is very different in Japan. Here, an increasing number of voices argue that the benefits of the relationship only flow one way. On a recent visit, I was continually challenged to explain just what Japan was getting out of these "historically good relations." The questions underlined the unease that influences and threatens to dominate Japanese security thinking.

In Washington's eyes, the U.S.-Japan relationship just keeps improving. Some credit the "George-Jun" friendship shared by the president and the prime minister; long-time alliance watchers say it has eclipsed the "Ron-Yasu" era of the 1980s, the previous high-water mark. Prime Minister Koizumi deserves credit for seizing the opportunities that followed the Sept. 11, 2001 terror attacks and taking the initiative in ways that no other Japanese prime minister had. Others note the groundwork laid by alliance supporters on both sides of the Pacific who vowed ties would never again be as strained as they were in the early 1990s. No matter what the cause, the result is the best relations ever and, according to one administration official, Tokyo's "unprecedented influence" in Washington.

Yet for all the applause and optimism in the U.S., there is considerable unease in Japan. This nervousness takes several forms.

First, there is the feeling that Japan has no foreign policy of its own and only parrots U.S. positions on issues. While the U.S. views Prime Minister Koizumi as a loyal ally, at home he is seen as a lap dog, blindly following President Bush down whatever path he takes. At one conference, a Japanese speaker said that Japanese admire South Koreans for being able to stand up to Americans. She concluded that the Japanese were "intimidated" and noted a rising frustration in Japan arising from the government's lack of a foreign policy strategy.

An offshoot of this thinking condemns the U.S. for pushing Japan to continually do more on security issues — deploying Maritime Self Defense Forces to the Indian Ocean during the Afghan War ("showing the flag") and sending Ground Self Defense Forces to Iraq (putting "boots on the ground"). These critics complain that Washington is using the war against terrorism, and a pliant prime minister, to recalibrate the security equilibrium in Japan. Bush

administration hawks are realizing their goal of creating "a UK in Asia" and pushing Japan to become a more "normal" nation. The critics believe that Japan can't say "no" to the U.S. and that Washington sets the security agenda in Tokyo.

A second concern focused on U.S. statements about Japan developing a nuclear arsenal. At just about every stop on my tour, someone wanted to know what the U.S. really meant when American politicians said Tokyo should contemplate arming itself with nuclear weapons. The Japanese see dark forces at work. In the short term, they believe Washington is playing that card to force Beijing to take action against North Korea; in the long term, they see themselves as pawns in an eventual confrontation with China.

A third strand involves fear of abandonment. Several Japanese confessed that Tokyo's support for the U.S. in Iraq was intended to ensure that the U.S. heeded Japanese concerns when Washington turned its attention to North Korea. Japan worries that the U.S. 1) would not fight to get Japan a seat at the multilateral negotiations; 2) might not support Japanese attempts to get its concerns (especially abductees) on the agenda; and 3) might cut a deal that didn't address Japanese security concerns and left Tokyo with the bill, as in the Agreed Framework talks.

On one level, those fears are easy to address. The U.S. is pushing Japan to contribute to the war against terror, but U.S. officials have stressed at every opportunity that only Tokyo can decide what it will do and that Washington will respect those decisions. No responsible U.S. politician with any authority or influence has ever advocated Japan going nuclear; few developments are potentially more destabilizing and more counter to U.S. interests in the region. The U.S. has and will support Japan in the North Korean negotiations because a failure to do so could rupture the alliance. U.S. credibility in Asia and elsewhere depends on it being seen as a responsible ally; a failure to address Japanese security concerns would undermine the alliance and Washington's image worldwide. And indeed the U.S. has staunchly supported Japanese demands throughout the difficult negotiations with Pyongyang.

It is encouraging that this insecurity hasn't taken its usual form. In the past, any signs of Sino-U.S. collaboration would have prompted considerable nervousness in Japan. On this trip, however, no one asked whether Washington's readiness to work with Beijing to solve the North Korean nuclear problem

heralded another era of Japan-passing or whether closer relations with China would come at Japan's expense.

There are still reasons to be worried, however. Tokyo's belief that it has to back the U.S. in Iraq to make sure it gets a hearing when it comes to North Korea reveals a disturbing lack of confidence in the alliance. That insecurity may be unfounded, but the problem is the perception — not reality — and it is unclear what will ease the fear of abandonment.

A solution will be especially hard to find if, as I suspect, the fear is rooted in the notion that Japan is not a truly independent actor when it comes to foreign policy. If Japan is not making its own choices in such matters, then it has to be obsessed with what the U.S. thinks and does — especially at a time of rising tension in Northeast Asia. At a recent meeting, one Japanese speaker after another — all intelligent and thoughtful people, but not security specialists — declared that the U.S. made all important security decisions for Japan and Tokyo was incapable of asserting its own will in such matters.

This sense of helplessness is generating a backlash. Masatoshi Honda, an associate professor at Musashino Women's University, argues that the lack of a sense of identity is fostering "political nationalism." More and more Japanese, like the one who admired the South Koreans, feel that they need to be more assertive, especially when it comes to dealing with the U.S.

The result is the politicization of the security alliance with the U.S. Even though Japan needs a debate on national security, the focus of that debate should be the external security environment and the best way to protect the country in those circumstances. Discussion of the security alliance should follow a broader assessment of national security needs.

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But much of the blame belongs on the shoulders of Japanese who have avoided taking responsibility for their decisions and instead passed the buck to Washington. They do themselves, their country, and the alliance a disservice.

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