



The U.S.-Japan alliance: unbalanced and unfulfilled

by Mindy Kotler

U.S. President George Bush will soon meet with Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro to affirm a number of promising agreements. Decade-long quarrels over the relocation of the Futenma U.S. Marine Corps Air Station in Okinawa and of home-porting a nuclear carrier in Yokosuka appear resolved. Five long years of talks to foster greater U.S.-Japan security cooperation look successful. Japanese officials are also close to reopening their market to U.S. beef. Yet, in all cases, the negotiations were bitter and Japan's citizens remain opposed.

Americans are becoming increasingly skeptical of Japan's promises and negotiations that end simply with recommendations. U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Lawless, in Tokyo last month, argued that the U.S.-Japan alliance risks being damaged by "interminable dialogue over parochial issues." In both the security and trade arenas, legislators and negotiators exhibit frustration with Japan over a series of issues and delays that continue to mark the interaction between the two countries. Strains in "the best ever" U.S.-Japan relationship are showing.

Congressional hearings on Japan during the last week of September illustrate well some of the problems. The House Committee on Ways and Means held a hearing on United States-Japan economic and trade dealings, and the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations convened a broader review of U.S.-Japan political and military relations. Although downplayed by the administration, dismissed as merely "letting off steam" or congressional posturing, and generally ignored by the press, these hearings were significant.

The Ways & Means Committee hearing was the most contentious. Private sector witnesses from the auto, insurance, medical device, and beef industries described a litany of still closed or manipulated markets in Japan. They pointed out that there hasn't been substantial Japanese financial reform or modernization of banking and investment laws. Transparency remains an obstacle. In fact, new regulations and laws are being proposed and enacted to limit foreign investment. Japan continues to protect a range of high-technology products. And, like China, Japan manipulates its currency.

Bush administration witnesses from the office of the U.S. Trade Representative, the Department of Agriculture, and the Treasury tried to emphasize the progress achieved by listing how few economic and trade disputes exist. Yet, the administration witnesses conceded that several major issues remain unresolved. Assistant USTR Wendy Cutler admitted that "while we continue to make good progress up and down the trade front, we still run into heavily reinforced bulwarks against change."

Cutler said the administration shared congressional "frustration over the glacial speed with which Japan has been moving to reopen its market to U.S. beef." She also warned that at the World Trade Organization ministerial talks, Japan "must pitch in to make substantial progress in the three agriculture pillars of export subsidies, market access, and domestic support. Frankly, the Japanese have allowed their protectionist domestic agriculture interests to prevail, and this has been disappointing." Ending, Cutler noted that "We have come a long way with Japan over the years and have found ways of doing business on the trade front that are generally yielding good results....We have some very real trade problems with Japan today that require our focused and constant attention and engagement at all levels."

U.S. lawmakers were genuinely surprised that the 1980s issues of apple, beef, and rice are still alive. They were annoyed by the positive spin the government officials presented, pressing the officials to make more definitive statements. Ways and Means Committee staff dismissed assertions that the hearing was mere pandering to a trade constituency. The hearing had been planned since spring and postponed several times. What is significant, they say, is that there was a consensus among Democrats and Republicans on the importance of the hearing. One congressman, Rep. Ben Cardin (D-MD), "thanked" Japan for "bringing the two parties together.

The Senate hearing on security and foreign policy was more nuanced and polite. Both Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill and Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Lawless welcomed the warmer relationship between the U.S. and Japan and described how much new cooperation had occurred since 1999. Yet, like their colleagues focused on trade, both Hill and Lawless felt that there was much more to do.

There was clear frustration with Japan. As Lawless stated, "... measured against Japan's capabilities to contribute to international security, and measured against Japan's global interests and the benefits Japan derives from peace and stability around the world, these changes remain quite modest....We can both see the trend in Japanese security policy toward a more active role in international security affairs. It is a welcome trend. But we can also see that this trend will take considerable time to reach fruition." In regard to the decade-long discussion over the relocation of Futenma, Lawless told reporters after the hearing, "we are saying to the Japanese government - you undertook this obligation in 1996 to replace Futenma, we've been waiting. It is not our fault, we want you to help us replace Futenma for the benefit of the alliance because the alliance needs this capability, as simple as that."

Most symbolic of Japan's self-absorption is the issue of continued visits to the Yasukuni Shrine. Columbia University's Gerald Curtis, who followed the officials at the Senate hearing, noted the Yasukuni Shrine and nearby museum are "not simply a shrine to honor the young men who fought and died for their country....Yasukuni is a shrine that honors the ideology and the policies of the government that sent these young men to the battlefields of Asia and the Pacific."

Continuing visits to the shrine aggravate regional relations just as the U.S. is working hard to stabilize them. Stopping visits to Yasukuni will not necessarily improve Sino-Japanese relations, but, said Curtis, "it is a necessary condition for making improvement of those relations possible." Accordingly, Prime Minister Koizumi's fifth visit to the Yasukuni shrine soon after the hearing was not seen as a positive development.

The U.S. goal of encouraging Japan to become a more internationally active and responsible modern democracy is welcome. Yet, it fails in the face of traditional Japanese business and domestic politics. In both hearings, the legislators seemed to interpret the witnesses' emphasis on relative progress as more "waiting for Japan to change." They are tired of waiting. So is this administration.

The day before the Futenma agreement was reached, an exasperated Lawless fumed, "We are trying to bring the substance of the alliance up to the level that it probably should have achieved some time ago." He is right to be concerned. The late October interim report on the "transformation and realignment for the future" of the U.S.-Japan alliance is an impressive set of recommendations – if it can be implemented. Built into the document, however, is an implicit deference to Japan's political process.

Continuation of "the best ever" U.S.-Japan relationship will have to be based on results and not mere wishes. President Bush meets with Prime Minister Koizumi in Kyoto on Nov. 16 and again at the APEC Leaders Summit in Busan, Korea a few days later, believing that both the beef and security issues have been resolved. Yet, negative Japanese public opinion, ministry rulemaking, and inevitable tariffs must still be surmounted before Japan reopens its doors to U.S. beef. The security agreement faces indignant local opposition, difficult technology negotiations, and equivocal leadership. Resolution of these disagreements may be further away than anticipated.

The Japanese government has maneuvered the U.S. into agreements structured to be delayed. Commissions, local governments, public opinion, and inter-ministerial politics are certain to justify Tokyo's continued inaction and lack of leadership. U.S. patience has its limits. There is a growing realization in Washington that brushing aside myriad differences in hopes of creating a working ally in Asia is an unsustainable policy. For now, U.S. President Bush's threshold for patience and friendship with the Japanese prime minister is the great unknown.

Mindy Kotler [mktotler@jiaponline.org] is director of the Japan Information Access Project. Opinions expressed are those of the author. As always, differing views and readers' responses are welcome.