



Rendezvous at Graceland: tender love, maybe, but no peace and stability by Ayako Doi

President George W. Bush's visit to Graceland with Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro last week was brilliant – as a publicity stunt to deflect the media from the opportunities the two men missed to use their excellent chemistry to make a positive difference in the world. The U.S. media seem to have been taken in completely by pictures of a samurai impersonating the American idol of his youth in an impromptu kabuki as his cowboy friend enjoyed a light moment. Their visible fondness for each other and the amount of time they spent together were particularly notable in contrast to the tense atmosphere and blunders that characterized Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit last fall.

But a serious journalist should have asked how Bush and Koizumi have used their personal ties to advance “peace and stability” in their neighborhood and around the world. Though the two men often pay lip service to that phrase, as they did last week, a glance at developments in East Asia, never mind Iraq and the rest of the world, shows they've left a poor record. East Asia is far less stable and much more volatile than it was in early 2001 when the two men took office.

Their most visible failure has been North Korea, as was made plain by Pyongyang's missile tests July 4. Kim Jong-il may have been cheating on the 1994 denuclearization pact with the U.S. when Bush rejected Seoul's Sunshine policy and broke off the dialogue the Clinton administration had opened, but the North didn't have the number of nuclear bombs the CIA suspects it now has built. The Six-Party Talks, devised by the White House as a way to avoid bilateral negotiations with North Korea, went nowhere. Since Kim's rocket scientists put what looked like a long-range missile on a launch pad a few weeks ago, the only option the U.S. had was to pray that the Dear Leader wouldn't push his brinkmanship over the edge. That prayer wasn't answered.

One big factor in the failure of the six-party format is U.S. mistrust of China and South Korea for their perceived softness toward the North, and the administration's rejection of their plea for direct talks between Washington and Pyongyang on the nuclear issue. That has also contributed to the deterioration of U.S. relations with South Korea, where anti-Americanism is now a mainstream idea. Some experts now worry that if Seoul has to choose between Washington and Beijing as its ultimate ally, it would choose Beijing.

Japan and South Korea were enjoying an unprecedented surge of friendly feelings toward each other before Koizumi arrived on the scene, thanks to former ROK President Kim Dae-jung's bold initiative to overcome the two countries' historical animosity. Today, after Koizumi's five visits to Yasukuni Shrine and an increasingly bitter argument over

Takehima/Tokdo, bilateral relations have cooled to the point that President Roh Moo-hyun refused to host an annual “no-necktie” get-together with Koizumi this year.

Even after Koizumi's first visit to Yasukuni, on Aug. 13, 2001, Beijing was tolerant enough to receive him two months later for a fence-mending visit. But his insistence on making it an annual pilgrimage froze ties at the top – and that has put a frost on the Chinese public's feelings toward the Japanese as a whole. The two countries also have been rubbing up against each other in a territorial dispute in the East China Sea, and last year Japan needlessly mixed itself into the Taiwan issue by insisting on including a mention of it in a joint security communiqué with the U.S.

Japan's desire to resolve its territorial dispute with Russia and sign a peace treaty, putting a formal end to World War II, hasn't gone anywhere under Koizumi. The *Asahi Shimbun* recently published an analysis saying that the prospect a settlement has receded to about where it was before the 1993 Tokyo Declaration, in which Prime Minister Hosokawa Morihiro and Russian President Boris Yeltsin agreed to begin working toward that goal.

It may be unfair to blame Bush and Koizumi for all the deterioration in the security situation in East Asia in the last five years. But they could have made a difference on many issues if they had used their strong leadership and close ties wisely.

Instead, they used the new paradigm created by the 9/11 terrorist attacks to transform the bilateral security treaty, whose scope was limited to the defense of Japan, into a full-scale military alliance for global policing and peacekeeping. Thanks to U.S. pressure on Japan to buy U.S. weapons systems and Koizumi's decision to break the postwar taboo on wartime use of the military overseas by deploying Japanese troops to support allied operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, U.S. and Japanese forces can now communicate with each other and coordinate operations almost anywhere in the world.

But they either inadvertently or deliberately disregarded the fact that activism by the Japanese military would cause alarm in neighboring countries. As Koizumi stiffed China's demand that he stop honoring war criminals, Washington criticized Beijing's military spending, fanning the notion that China is becoming a hegemonic threat. Some U.S. officials, including former Deputy Secretary of State Rich Armitage and Ambassador to Japan Thomas Schieffer, publicly said Koizumi need not bend on Yasukuni as long as China keeps pounding him on it. Though the “Yasukuni issue” has become the greatest concern of Asia hands in Washington prior to Koizumi's arrival last week, Bush said nothing about it in their private meeting, silently nodding at Koizumi's defense of his position, according to a Japanese briefer.

Bush apparently didn't even raise a question about the dispute between Tokyo and Seoul over Takeshima, even though escalation of a nasty argument between its two main allies in the region should be of serious concern to the U.S. In fact, the two sides were so eager to present an image of unity that, according to the briefer, they "agreed" on how to respond to Iran's nuclear ambitions and Myanmar's human rights violations, the two issues on which Washington and Tokyo don't see eye to eye at all. By sweeping these and other vexing issues under the rug rather than trying to find mutually satisfactory solutions, they are sowing the seeds of a serious policy divergence in the coming years when there may not be a great cowboy-samurai chemistry to bridge the differences.

Japan's new military activism, which couldn't have happened without U.S. prodding and blessing, could come back to haunt us, if more nationalistic Japanese leaders decide that their national interest does not coincide with that of the U.S.

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