

**Affirming Japan's "Better Angels"** by Mindy Kotler

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Expectations are low for Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's trip to Tokyo next week. And they should be. Japan's economy is imploding and the government is bereft of leadership. But Secretary Clinton can use this political vacuum as an opportunity to work on the foundations of the relationship. With Japan she can build upon the "shared values" that sustain the U.S.-Japan alliance.

The U.S. agenda has to be restructured. America's top admiral admits publicly that realignment of U.S. forces in Japan will be delayed. The plans for the replacement of the controversial Futema airfield are going into their 14<sup>th</sup> year and the money for land-fill to put the new airfield into the ocean has still not been budgeted. Japan has few peacekeepers overseas, only two in the Sudan, and little stomach for more. The North Koreans are trying to shut the Japanese out of the Six-Party Talks on de-nuclearization and Tokyo refuses to define "success" on their demand for the return of its remaining 12 citizens abducted by the North.

Japan's economic promises are fragile. The foreign aid commitment that Prime Minister Aso Taro made at Davos was accounting magic that didn't add new funds to Japan's shrinking ODA budget. Worse, every day brings more bad economic news. Japan's vaunted trade surplus plunged 80 percent to a 26-year low in 2008; unemployment has expanded to 6 percent in January; and the GDP shrank nearly 3 percent in December.

Prime Minister Aso and his Cabinet are extremely unpopular: the latest surveys show between 14 percent and 18 percent approval. Over 40 percent say that opposition leader Ozawa Ichiro would be most suitable to be prime minister, while less than 25 percent say Aso. Even so, it is unclear if an election will be held any sooner than is required by September.

With months of indecisive leadership and uncertain politics ahead in Japan, Secretary Clinton can ask little of Tokyo. She can continue the quiet work of her predecessors in bringing Japan closer to the contemporary values shared among the other G-7 nations. Modern democracies foster and protect certain values. How these states treat its and others' weakest members are a great measure of those values. This is the definition of "soft power."

Interestingly, it is here that the Bush administration has had some success. Before President Bush took office, there were weak or nonexistent laws in Japan regarding domestic violence and human-trafficking (where enforcement is lax) or child pornography (still tied up in the parliament). Until last year, Tokyo would not consider joining other G-7 countries in

signing The Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of Child Abduction. It still has not agreed to do so but has said it would now "consider" it. And it was only last month that Prime Minister Aso admitted publicly that his family used Allied POWs as slave labor in their mines during World War II. However, he did not apologize.

Apologies and the protections of human dignity are now part of statecraft. Affirmations of these basic values in modern democracies are not dependent on administrations, elections, or conflicts. This week, for example, China submitted its first human rights report to the UN Human Rights Committee. The Pope demanded a Bishop's apology "unequivocally" and "in public" for denying the Holocaust – the same words used by Congressman Mike Honda's resolution in 2007 asking Japan's government to formally apologize to the comfort women.

Thus the Diet's passage of the pending child pornography law or signing The Hague Convention would go a long way toward confirming common values with the United States. An apology to the American POWs who slaved for private Japanese companies under horrific and illegal conditions would help establish greater trust with Americans. And yes, a Cabinet decision (*kakugi kettei*) affirming an apology to the comfort women as requested by the U.S. House of Representative in July 2007 would show Japan's commitment to modern values and sincerity – which are still doubted in Asia.

Secretary Clinton can accomplish a lot through these expressions of "universal values" that bring Japan and the U.S. closer together. Commitment to these "soft power" issues provides a stable framework for strategic negotiations when Japan has a serious government. And all would be more permanent than an airfield, a peacekeeper, or an oiler in the Indian Ocean.