



## Another Opportunity for Mr. Koizumi

by Brad Glosserman

The terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 have changed the diplomatic momentum in Northeast Asia and Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro has been the chief beneficiary of the new dynamic in the region. The calls for action on behalf of its American ally have given Japan and the Koizumi government the cover they need to make controversial decisions on security policies. To his credit, the prime minister has responded well: his desire to act as a good ally to the United States has been matched by unprecedented diplomatic efforts to allay the concerns of Japan's neighbors. Now he must deliver on both fronts. Japan must follow through on the prime minister's promises and match his good intentions with concrete acts. There are many in the region who do not expect Mr. Koizumi to deliver.

Japan's relations with its two most important neighbors, China and South Korea, have been troubled since the spring. There were many sources of friction: a controversy over middle-school history textbooks, trade disputes, fishing disputes, and the prime minister's trip to the Yasukuni Shrine in August. The difficulties virtually paralyzed diplomatic relations between Tokyo and Beijing, while relations between Seoul and Tokyo seem to be unraveling. Both governments had rebuffed the prime minister's attempts to meet and explain his positions. The situation had reached the point where Mr. Koizumi was even prepared to skip the annual opening session of the United Nations General Assembly, preferring instead to go to Southeast Asia where he would have received a warmer welcome.

All that changed on Sept. 11. In the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Japanese diplomatic and security policy has been framed within the context of the relationship with the United States. The debate over defense policy took on a new urgency, and memories of Japan's inaction during the Persian Gulf War made a definitive response more pressing still. Complaints and objections by Japan's neighbors became less important in the face of demands from its key ally. Equally important, neither China nor South Korea wanted to be seen as blocking U.S. efforts to build a coalition against terrorism. That simple fact overcame resistance in both Seoul and Beijing to Tokyo's overtures to resume more normal relations.

Of course, each country has its own concerns. In Beijing, the chief focus is the upcoming Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Leaders' Meeting that will be held in Shanghai later this month. China wants the meeting to go well and tense relations between Tokyo and Beijing could undermine its success. "Necessity" gave the Chinese leadership the excuse it needed to break the diplomatic logjam with Japan. And it got some valuable items in return when Mr. Koizumi visited last week. Mr. Koizumi visited the Marco Polo Bridge, a site that is rich in symbolism, and he issued apologies for Japanese wartime behavior that were unlikely in other circumstances. During his meeting with Mr.

Koizumi, Chinese President Jiang Zemin noted that Japanese efforts to aid the U.S. were understandable but he reminded the prime minister of the worries of other Asian nations. It is hard to believe that the Chinese government is truly concerned by the possibility of Japanese remilitarization, but it does play the card whenever it is handy.

South Korean concerns were more difficult to assuage, as was made abundantly clear by the protests that greeted the prime minister during his one-day visit to Seoul this week. There too Mr. Koizumi visited sites that commemorated Japan's occupation and he made a "heartfelt apology" and expressed remorse for the "pain and damage Korean people suffered during Japan's colonial occupation." Korean President Kim Dae-jung welcomed the apology, but asked the prime minister to match his words with deeds. On the sensitive issue of Japan's efforts to assist the U.S. coalition against terrorism, President Kim asked Mr. Koizumi to make sure the activities would remain within the boundaries of the Japanese Peace Constitution. By agreeing to meet with the prime minister and resume relations, Mr. Kim ensures that his country has some say in Japan's national debate. On another positive note, the two men also agreed to form a panel of experts to examine the history question that bedevils relations between the two countries.

The burden is now on Mr. Koizumi. Mr. Kim's decision to meet with the Japanese prime minister is very unpopular in South Korea. The opposition was strong enough to prevent Mr. Koizumi from addressing the country's National Assembly. Commentary in Korean newspapers generally agreed that Mr. Koizumi's offers fell short of Korean expectations. And there are suspicions that all he offered were words; given the disappointment that followed the historic 1998 Korean-Japanese diplomatic breakthrough, the Korean people will be watching intently to see that he follows through.

At the same time, the visits have boosted the prime minister's position at home. The willingness of the governments in China and South Korea to meet with him deprives Japan's domestic opposition of a critical argument against legislation to authorize action by the Self-Defense Forces on behalf of the U.S.-led coalition. Mr. Koizumi's willingness to apologize also meets demands of Japan's left. In the game of Japanese politics, where a prime minister is constantly forced to balance competing factions and parties within his coalition, the Conservatives can now claim their due.

Mr. Koizumi's challenge is seizing the moment without exploiting it. He has the opportunity to move the Japanese security debate forward. He can adjust his country's defense policies in a way that aids its alliance partner and allows Japan to make a more meaningful contribution to international security. But that contribution need not focus on the military side. In fact, pushing the military component is the surest way to provoke a backlash. The opponents - both domestic and foreign - of

Japanese attempts to assume a higher profile are looking for that sort of opportunism.

The planned dispatch of an Aegis-equipped destroyer to assist the U.S. fleet in the Indian Ocean was just such a misstep. Although U.S. officials were pressing Japan to show the flag, it is unlikely that the Japanese vessel could have contributed much. It did arouse fear of overreach in Japan, and even within Mr. Koizumi's own Liberal Democratic Party, which ultimately forced the government to scuttle its plans.

Within the anti-terrorism coalition, Japan's best contributions are in the areas of diplomatic and financial support, logistics and intelligence. Japan has carefully developed its own relations with Middle Eastern governments, sometimes despite U.S. misgivings. For example, Japan is now Iran's largest trading partner and this relationship could pay dividends as the U.S. tries to build and maintain its coalition against terrorism. Tokyo has cultivated similar relationships with governments in Central Asia that could prove equally useful and could provide valuable intelligence as well. Equally important is support for the long-term nation-building that will commence when the war against Afghanistan is over. Japan's offer to host the conference to help develop a postwar government is a good start, but it is only that. Money for refugee resettlement - and aid during the war - and national development will also be needed.

The real test of Mr. Koizumi's intentions will be his willingness to use this new momentum to move forward with relations with China and South Korea. In dealing with Beijing, he should push for a trilateral dialogue that includes the U.S. so as to ease China's concerns about Japan's role in the region and the mission of the U.S.-Japan alliance. Intelligence sharing and coordination of anti-terrorism efforts could provide a foundation for more cooperation in the future.

The agenda with South Korea is wider. Mr. Koizumi, like Japan, has more to do. The establishment of a panel of experts to examine the history issue is a pressing issue. Not only must the group convene, but it must have concrete results. Pacific Forum CSIS has offered to facilitate a dialogue to produce a mutually agreed-upon history of Japan-South Korea relations. The prime minister should push to establish a regular, wide-ranging dialogue between the two countries. It should include diplomatic and security issues, and social and cultural ones as well. The depth of Korean anger toward Japan that has been demonstrated in recent weeks reveals that building better relations between the two countries must be broad based and include as wide a cross-section of the two societies as possible.

The goal is assuaging fears of Japanese intentions and proving that talk of peace is not cover for more calculated strategies. It will also allow Mr. Koizumi to show that he understands that regional security is not a zero-sum game. It would allow him to prove that he will use the new diplomatic momentum created by Sept. 11 to create a new security environment in Northeast Asia.

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