Michael J. Green

U.S.-Japanese Relations after Koizumi: Convergence or Cooling?

"Thank you, American people … for 'Love Me Tender.'" Thus spoke an ecstatic Japanese prime minister Junichiro Koizumi on June 29, 2006, after meeting with President George W. Bush and before heading off to a lavish White House dinner and an unprecedented presidential tour of Graceland, the home of Koizumi's beloved Elvis Presley. By any account, Koizumi steps down in September 2006 having built the strongest personal ties ever seen between Japanese and U.S. leaders, as well as the tightest security cooperation of the Washington-Tokyo alliance's five-decade history.

Yet, was the Bush-Koizumi connection too close? Did it mask underlying areas of divergence between the United States and Japan that will surface with less committed or skilled leadership in Tokyo? Some analysts voiced such concerns on the margins of the Koizumi visit to Washington. Dan Okimoto of Stanford University, a longtime Japan expert, warned in the *Christian Science Monitor* that, "after Koizumi steps down, we'll see an adjustment back to something that is not so one-sided and pro-American."[1] Ivo Daalder, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, told the *New York Times* that "Mr. Bush, for instance, is unlikely to challenge Mr. Koizumi on his much-criticized visits to the Yasukuni shrine, which honors the Japanese war dead of World War II, including the wartime prime minister who ordered the attack on Pearl Harbor."[2] Critics of Koizumi in Japan echoed these observations, arguing as Socialist parliamentarian Mizuho Fukushima did, that "Japan is the 51st state in the union. Koizumi's attitude is just to obey … the

Michael J. Green holds the Japan Chair and is a senior adviser at CSIS, as well as an associate professor of international relations at Georgetown University. He previously served as director for Asian affairs (2001–2003) and special assistant to the president and senior director for Asian affairs at the National Security Council during 2004–2005. He would like to thank Shinjiro Koizumi, Yuko Nakano, Koki Nishimura, and Kiyoto Tsuji for their comments on this manuscript.

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[United States]. To show his friendship, he sent troops to Iraq even though it is against our pacifist constitution."[3]

It is not surprising that political opponents of Bush or Koizumi might criticize the leaders' close personal relationship, but even supporters have expressed some concern about whether the tightening of U.S.-Japanese relations over the past five years is an aberration based on personal chemistry rather than a long-term trend and whether the post-Koizumi period will see continued strategic convergence or a cooling of relations. This question is important because even if the convergence trend will continue, both governments will have to make an effort and recognize the soft spots in their relationship.

For their part, Bush and Koizumi have pointed to what they see as the enduring qualities of a converging U.S.-Japanese security relationship. In their joint statement for the summit, entitled "The Japan-U.S. Alliance of the New Century," the leaders "celebrated their close personal friendship and the deep and increasing ties between the American and Japanese people" and noted that "the United States and Japan stand together not only against mutual threats, but also for the advancement of core universal values."[4] They also pointed to the importance of "deepening bilateral economic cooperation." On the whole, they "shared the expectation that the U.S.-Japan friendship and global cooperation shall continue to grow stronger." In other words, the two leaders spotlighted exactly what has contributed to the strong U.S.-Japanese alliance under their tenure and what they believe will likely keep it strong: relationships between their leaders, the external threat environment, common values, and economic relations.

Personal Synergy

Although another sighting of an Elvis-singing leader like Koizumi may not emerge for some time, the odds are good that the president and next prime minister will have reason to continue good personal ties and to keep their countries aligned. For the critics who say Bush became too close to Koizumi to be correct, one would have to assume that the next leader of Japan will resent that relationship and push away from the United States or simply be unwilling to attempt the same kind of close relationship. Judging from the race to succeed Koizumi as president of the Liberal Democratic Party and prime minister of Japan, however, the next prime minister will likely come into office with an affinity to collaborate with U.S. leadership.

The two strongest contenders in that race are Koizumi's first chief cabinet secretary, Yasuo Fukuda, and current chief cabinet secretary, Shinzo Abe. Although these men are rivals, both are members of Koizumi's faction and have served as his lieutenants during the most significant developments in

U.S.-Japanese security relations over the past five years. With then–Foreign Minister Makiko Tanaka embroiled in scandal, Fukuda acted as de facto national security adviser in the challenging months after the September 11 terrorist attacks. He orchestrated Japan's seven-point counterterrorism strategy, including the dispatch of oilers and destroyers to the Indian Ocean to support Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. Fukuda also formed a project team to pave the way for permanent legislation that would allow Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to participate in coalition operations without having to pass a separate bill each time, an initiative that will be a key agenda item for the next prime minister.

Was the Bush-Koizumi connection too close?

Abe served as Fukuda's deputy throughout the post–September 11 period and did much of the heavy lifting required to pass the legislation allowing the SDF to be deployed to Iraq. He appeared on television regularly and made passionate appeals for standing with the United States in its time of need to ensure that the United States will support Japan in future Asian crises. Abe continues to be more hawkish on China and North Korea. In contrast, since stepping down, Fukuda has grown critical of Koizumi's controversial visits to the Yakusuni shrine and has called for improved relations with China. Both Fukuda and Abe have a proven track record on the U.S.-Japanese alliance, however, and have made it clear they will continue to strengthen alliance ties. (Fukuda dropped out of the race on July 21, but others quickly stepped in to try to fill the void with a similar policy line.)

Criticism of the Bush-Koizumi relationship is understandably more pronounced in the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), and it is theoretically possible that Abe could stumble as prime minister in upper-house elections next summer, opening the way eventually for a DPJ-led coalition. The current leader of the opposition, Ichiro Ozawa, has decided to make China one of his first foreign visits to highlight Koizumi's inability to improve relations with Beijing because of the shrine visits. Ozawa has also criticized the troop dispatch to Iraq, arguing that Japan should have had a UN Security Council mandate before dispatching troops abroad. Ozawa's DPJ is a badly divided party, however, with as many pro-U.S. alliance hawks as former Socialist doves, and his UN mandate argument is at best a placeholder to keep his party from splitting on security issues. Moreover, Ozawa played a key role in managing U.S.-Japanese economic and security relations when he served as deputy chief cabinet secretary of the LDP administration of Prime Minister Noboru Takeshita in the late 1980s. If the DPJ comes into power, it will be at the helm of a coalition that includes parts of the LDP and therefore a majority inclined to maintain strong security ties with Washington. In short, Japan has come to

look like the United Kingdom, with a "loyal opposition," in which both major parties support alliance relations with the United States.

On the U.S. side of the equation, Bush will undoubtedly attempt to build a strong relationship with Abe or Ozawa and to maintain a focus on Japan as the linchpin of U.S. strategy in Asia. This forecast applies through 2008, but one must read the tea leaves of U.S. politics to anticipate how the next president might handle Japan. Within the Republican Party, potential frontrunner candidates such as Senator John McCain (R-Ariz.) have already demonstrated an interest in the U.S.-Japanese alliance, and conservatives would likely sustain a Japan-centered Asia policy regardless of the chosen candidate. The Democratic Party has focused relatively little on Japan in its national security debate, but there are some indications that the party could be divided on Asia policy just as it has on Iraq. In their forthcoming book *Hard Power*, Kurt Campbell and Mike O'Hanlon advanced the view that the balance of power matters in Asia and the U.S.-Japanese alliance is central to the U.S. position in the region.[5] Some potential candidates have already picked up on that theme, as former Virginia governor Mark Warner (D) did in a speech to the Japan Society of New York in June 2006.[6] Further to the left of the Democratic Party, some may be drawn to the *New York Times* editorial of May 2005, which argued that the United States has become too close to Japan and had failed to accommodate the rise of China.[7] Time, as well as the midterm congressional elections and the Democratic primary race, will tell.

The Asian Threat Environment

Toward the end of the Cold War, a scholarly consensus began to emerge in Japan and the United States that the relationship would come apart without the unifying threat of the Soviet Union and with the new complications of techno-economic competition.[8] That consensus rapidly evaporated as the collapse of the Japanese economic bubble, Chinese and North Korean nuclear and missile development in the mid-1990s, and revelations that Pyongyang had been abducting innocent Japanese civilians pushed Japan back toward the United States. Rather than letting the alliance drift, Prime Minister Ryutarô Hashimoto and President Bill Clinton signed a joint declaration in April 1996 reaffirming the security relationship and opening new areas of cooperation both in missile defense and in response to "situations in the area surrounding Japan."[9]

Following North Korea's ballistic missile tests in July 2006 and the Japanese public's subsequent increased sense of insecurity and closeness to the United States, this trend is unlikely to change significantly in the years ahead. North Korea will test the alliance in new ways, however, primarily because the Japanese side will eventually want to know how the United States

plans to dismantle, deter, and defeat a North Korean nuclear weapons program that continues to grow in spite of intensive diplomatic efforts.

For the first few decades of the U.S.-Japanese alliance, Tokyo was extremely careful to avoid becoming entrapped (*makikomareru*) in the U.S. competition with China. Now the U.S. side must, for the first time, make decisions about how it positions itself as an ally of Japan in the growing competition between Tokyo and Beijing. This is particularly important as Japanese and Chinese warships and aircraft have been maneuvering at close ranges around the contested Senkaku/Diaoyutai island chain in response to Chinese unilateral, exploratory oil drilling and the subsequent dispatch of Japanese military and coast guard patrols. Japan does trade more with China now than with the United States, but this fact has done little to improve Japanese public opinion about China or to soften the Japanese Defense Agency's warnings about China's military buildup, given the increase of People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy submarines and surface combatants in disputed territorial waters around Japan. On the diplomatic front, the Chinese-Japanese rivalry has heated up, with Beijing organizing international efforts to block Japan's UN Security Council bid and Tokyo pulling other democracies such as India, Australia, and New Zealand into the new East Asian Summit to balance Chinese influence. Japan and China have never been powerful in Asia at the same time, and these two giants will struggle to find a stable equilibrium for years to come.

Both major Japanese parties support alliance relations with the United States.

If there is a possibility for divergence between Tokyo and Washington regarding Northeast Asia in the years ahead, it will not be because Japan takes the Asian threat environment less seriously than the United States, which was always the U.S. concern during the Cold War. Instead, the challenges may come in areas where Japan reacts to regional threats with greater sensitivity than the United States. In short, to keep the alliance strong, the United States will have to demonstrate continually that the U.S.-Japanese alliance remains Japan's most credible line of defense against regional threats. The North Korean nuclear and missile programs and the PLA military buildup will continue to preoccupy the United States and will almost certainly lead future administrations to continue strengthening U.S.-Japanese defense cooperation.

For the United States, the key question may be whether future governments in Japan can live up to Koizumi's standards. After the successful dispatch of Japanese forces to the Indian Ocean and Iraq, U.S. military planners and senior officials have come to see the dispatch of the SDF as the rule rather than as the exception. In Japan, however, future dispatches of forces

could become prisoner to other priorities or crises in the Diet if a separate bill is required for each mission. Moreover, polling evidence suggests that although the Japanese public was impressed with the efforts of the SDF in Iraq, they still see the dispatch of Japanese forces as the exception rather than the rule and remain averse to casualties. U.S. confidence in Japan could also be shaken by a failure to implement the May 2006 "Two-Plus-Two" agreement on the realignment of bases in Okinawa. Bush and Koizumi lauded the agreement during their June 2006 summit, but there is opposition in Okinawa and from members of the Diet unhappy about the price tag, which is estimated at up to $6 billion.

Common values are not just a talking point in a summit joint statement.

On the whole, the international threat environment is likely to continue pushing the United States and Japan closer together as alliance partners. Already, the depth of coordination in areas ranging from development assistance to missile defense and export controls is unprecedented and reflects a shared assessment of the challenges both nations face. Yet, the nature of the threats will continue to test traditional ways of managing the alliance, and each side has high expectations for mutual security cooperation. It will take continued high-level attention in both governments to ensure that the U.S.-Japanese alliance lives up to those expectations in the next major crises to come.

Common Universal Values

What is most striking about the new U.S.-Japanese alliance relationship, after the closeness of the president and prime minister, is the degree to which both governments have highlighted the bond provided by their shared values. As Bush and Koizumi noted in their joint statement on June 29,

> [t]he United States and Japan share interests in: winning the war on terrorism; maintaining regional stability and prosperity; promoting free market ideals and institutions; upholding human rights; securing freedom of navigation and commerce, including sea lanes; and enhancing global energy security. It is these common values and common interests that form the basis for U.S.-Japan regional and global cooperation.[10]

This is a far cry from the frequent ideational confrontation that characterized U.S.-Japanese relations a decade or so ago. At that time, Japan's leading strategic thinkers tended to highlight the ideological differences with the United States as often as the commonalities. Typical was Eisuke Sakakibara's "A Japanese Economy That Has Surpassed Capitalism"[11] or writings praising

Japan's adherence to Asian values rather than global values or the Washington consensus.

So, is Koizumi just signing on to the Bush administration's freedom agenda, or does Japan really share these values? After all, there are still differences between Washington and Tokyo on Burma's troubled democratic transition, and Japanese bookstores still sell millions of books such as *Kokka no Hinkaku* (The Nation's Qualities),[12] which decry the loss of "Japaneseness" to American culture. The evidence is strong, however, that common values are not just a talking point in a summit joint statement. There is a fundamental convergence on universal norms between Washington and Tokyo that did not exist a decade ago.

Values have become increasingly central to Japan's own identity.

In 2001 the Japanese government proposed the Initiative for Development of Economies of Asia with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, designed to focus on good governance, rule of law, and economic transparency—hardly uniquely Asian norms. In the Asia-Africa summit in April 2005 at Bandung and numerous other occasions at which there were no Americans present at all, Koizumi and other senior Japanese ministers called for other states to join Japan in "disseminating universal values such as the rule of law, freedom, and democracy."[13] In 2006 the Office of the Prime Minister commissioned a panel on overseas economic cooperation, which argued that, "for the first time it is possible in today's international system to center international relations on a collection of countries with shared values and ideals."[14] Based on the panel's recommendation, the prime minister's office created the equivalent of a National Security Council to oversee overseas development strategy and to ensure that "democracy, freedom and rule of law" become central priorities.[15] Even on Burma, which has been a perennial symbol of Japan's independence from the U.S. agenda in Asia, Foreign Minister Taro Aso and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice agreed that the international community should apply stronger pressure on Myanmar to prompt the country's democratization.

The concept of universal democracy promotion, however, does not now dominate Japanese foreign policy decisionmaking. Yet, the convergence of Japanese and U.S. interests in universal norms is pronounced, as a response to the rise of Chinese influence and as an instinctive spotlight on what separates Japan from China. It is also partly the result of Koizumi's destruction of the old Japanese political economy and a recognition that an Asian-values buffer against globalization and U.S. pressure for reform is no longer necessary, but it is also based on Japan's increased realization that the promotion

of democracy, good governance, and rule of law provide stability across Asia in ways that directly contribute to Japan's national interest.

This trend really began in the mid-1990s, when Tokyo found that economic tools of aid and investment were almost completely ineffective in dissuading China from testing nuclear weapons, bracketing the Taiwan Strait with missiles, and sending PLA Navy submarines and destroyers into contested waters. Japan's identity in Asia also came under pressure from China's use of the history card and by China's growing assertiveness in forming regional multilateral groupings favorable to Beijing, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Leading politicians and strategic thinkers in Tokyo seized on one undeniable truth in their search for a response to the China conundrum: Japan is a democracy, and China is not. Born from a combination of internal political and economic reform and growing concern about China, values have become increasingly central to Japan's own identity.

Strategic convergence will very likely continue for years after Bush and Koizumi.

The future of Japan's focus on values and the bond it provides to U.S.-Japanese relations will depend to a significant degree on whether the freedom agenda survives beyond the Bush administration. For some Americans, on the right and the left, democracy promotion has been discredited by the election of Hamas in the Palestinian Authority and the difficult situation in Iraq. In Asia, however, democracy is clearly on the march, and compelling reasons exist for a continued regional focus on the consolidation of democracy. The only question is whether future U.S. leadership will focus on it.

Economic Relations: From Threat to Asset

Economic issues once represented the greatest threat to the U.S.-Japanese security relationship. In 1988, Representative Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.) quipped that the United States and the Soviets fought the Cold War and Japan won, while polls that same year showed that more Americans feared the Japanese economy than the Soviet threat.[16] Today, the only major bilateral economic irritant was Tokyo's decision to close its market to U.S. beef after the outbreak of mad cow disease, and even that issue was resolved at the 2006 Bush-Koizumi summit. The Bush administration's problem with the Japanese economy was never the threat it posed to U.S. companies but rather the protracted slump that lowered Japan's strategic weight and denied opportunities for U.S. firms. After five years of reforms, as well as changes in business practices that go back five years prior to that, Japanese firms have largely corrected their bad balance sheets and are once again competitive.

With the reform process opening new opportunities and the Japanese economy growing again, U.S. firms made more than $11 billion in profit in Japan in 2005, compared with only about $3 billion in China.[17]

Clearly, the "threat" of Japanese economic strength is no longer a problem in the alliance, and the danger of nongrowth in the Japanese economy seems to have been largely overcome as well. The problem to watch, therefore, is whether the Koizumi reforms slow down, given that only 16 percent of Japanese recently polled said they should continue unchanged, and whether U.S. companies start losing interest in Japan as a result. As it is, there are now five U.S. chambers of commerce in China and only one in Japan, even though Japan's gross domestic product is four times China's, as are U.S. profits in Japan.

Recognizing this possibility, the U.S.-Japan Business Roundtable and other groups have called for formal economic integration agreements or even full free-trade agreements (FTAs).[18] An FTA would require Japan to liberalize its agricultural market, however, something the ruling LDP is still unwilling to do even though it now relies on agricultural support much less than in the past. In their joint statement, Bush and Koizumi called for further steps to "deepen economic cooperation," which will help sustain broader strategic and ideational convergence and set a high standard for broader Asian economic integration.

Elvis Has Left the Building

The strategic convergence of the United States and Japan began before the famous Bush-Koizumi relationship and will very likely continue for years after it. Undoubtedly, the deep trust and friendship between the president and prime minister compelled both governments to step up cooperation and captured the attention of the press in an unprecedented way. Yet, the leaders' relationship was as much a reflection of the closer strategic, ideational, and economic convergence of the United States and Japan in the twenty-first century as it was the cause. At the same time, the closer Washington-Tokyo relationship in recent years also suggests that alliance management cannot be done on autopilot. It requires leadership, proactive dialogue, and close strategic coordination. The alliance can easily drift without attention from the top.

Notes

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