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PRIME MINISTER ABE'S VISIT TO THE UNITED STATES

Yukio Okamoto

Prime Minister Abe Shinzo has returned from his first Japan-U.S. summit in good spirits and good shape. During his two-day visit to Washington and at Camp David he tackled a broad agenda covering many aspects of the Japan-U.S. relationship.

A first goal for Prime Minister Abe while in the U.S. was the cultivation of a strong personal friendship with George W. Bush. Prime Minister Abe's predecessor, Prime Minister Koizumi, had made a special effort during his term to cultivate a relationship of personal trust with President Bush, an effort that paid dividends in terms of smoothing

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communications between the two governments on vital issues. Continuity in close personal relations between the leaders of Japan and the United States has become all the more crucial as the departures of noted “Japan hands” from the Administration have somewhat diminished the direct, horizontal linkages between the ministerial and sub-ministerial levels of both governments.

The second goal was to highlight the importance of the Japan-U.S. security alliance. Prime Minister Abe called the alliance “irreplaceable”, emphasizing both its importance and its solidity. In talks with both the president and congressional leaders, Mr. Abe emphasized the contributions Japan has been making to the war on terror.

Immediately prior to the summit the announcement was made of the establishment of a blue-ribbon panel on collective defense. With a membership drawn mostly from the hawkish and internationalist part of the Prime Minister’s circle, the panel is likely to recommend significant expansions of the rules of engagement for Japan Self Defense Forces (JSDF) under the present constitution, beyond the limits indicated by the Cabinet Legislative Bureau (CLB). Since the CLB’s interpretation of the Constitution has been the major stumbling block preventing the fuller participation of Japan in collective defense—either in the context of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty or JSDF deployments in UN peace keeping operations—the removal of these impediments will likely precede a constitutional revision.

One of the gratifying changes over the past few years has been the fading away of the charges that Japan is a free rider in the global security system. Part of this change is due to the activism demonstrated by former Prime Minister Koizumi, sending support vessels to the Indian Ocean as a part of Operation Enduring Freedom and Ground Self Defense Forces to Iraq in cooperation with the Coalition Authority’s reconstruction efforts. The repurposing and ongoing reconfiguration of the Japan-U.S. alliance as a “global alliance” has helped to erase the misunderstandings that used to undermine Japan’s image in America.

The possibility that Japan and the United States no longer saw eye to eye on the North Korean nuclear program had been a source of worry in the run-up to the summit. The recent reversal of U.S. sanctions against the Banco Delta Asia left many in Japan feeling betrayed. Sanctions against the bank had been perceived as part of a firm U.S.-Japan line against North Korea's contemptuous behavior as regards its obligations under the Six Party Talks.

Weakening of the tough U.S.-Japan line of "no economic cooperation without a complete, verifiable shutdown and international monitoring" threatened Japan with strategic abandonment. The current state of development of the North Korean missile program leaves the United States facing little threat of a direct North Korean nuclear attack upon its territories. Japan, however, lies within range of the tested Nodong series of missiles or, more brutally, the delivery of a weapon by small ship. A possible consequence is a split in the perceived U.S. and Japanese goals—with the public seeing Japan as seeking a total dismantlement of a North Korean strike capability while the U.S. may be seeking only the capping of the proliferation of North Korean nuclear technology.

Prime Minister Abe also received from President Bush a vow of support for the Japanese government's stance on the abductee issue. The continued lack of believable information from the North Korean government about the fates of the Japanese citizens it abducted in the past has been a touchstone issue for Mr. Abe. His rapid rise through the political hierarchy in defiance of the seniority system was bolstered by his consistent advocacy of the rights of the families of the abductees to know the fates of their loved ones. Fears that the U.S. government had grown tired of the abductee issue --and of the Abe Cabinet's ratcheting up of pressure upon the DPRK to provide more information—were assuaged by President Bush's clear and heartfelt statement.

The Prime Minister also received a message of presidential support for his position on an issue some in America see as related to the abductees—the so-called comfort women issue. A non-binding resolution in the U.S. House of

Representatives is suggesting to the Japanese government that the government apologize to the women who served in brothels established to provide sexual services for the Japanese imperial military.

Prime Minister Abe has stated:

“As both an individual and as prime minister, I sympathize with those women who were forced to taste life’s bitterness. I also am full of a feeling of a need to apologize over the fact that they were placed in such a painful situation.”

In response, President Bush said that in his opinion, the matter is settled.

Another achievement at the summit was a strong message supporting a joint program against the forces driving climate change. The Bush Administration’s rejection of the terms of the Kyoto Protocol during the Administration’s first term had been a political embarrassment for the Japanese government. The recent belated reversal of Bush Administration’s stance on climate change presented an opportunity for the U.S. to make amends with its ally.


Economic policy and trade disputes, the focal point of so many Japan-U.S. summits of the past, did not register this time. Japan’s politicians and diplomats can take great pride for keeping temperatures cool at the summit.

Sources say the two leaders spoke about China during their meetings even though at the press availability China was barely mentioned. On so many global issues—rising energy and commodities prices, the arms race in Asia, environmental degradation, the spread of rogue regimes—China plays a vital role. No countries have greater economic stakes in China than the U.S. and Japan. China also represents the Japan-U.S. alliance’s main regional competitor. It is simply the elephant in the room—too big to ignore.

The public statements from the summit did not present a clear vision for the proposed “Alliance of Democracies” security architecture for the Asia-Pacific region. In particular, the two leaders did not say how they intended to reassure the Chinese government that the alliance of democracies was not just a fig leaf for a

containment strategy aimed at China.

The summit should be seen as a solid first step. In the coming year, Prime Minister Abe will be probably be asking the Bush Administration to join his government in the crafting of a detailed and inspiring vision of America's and Japan's common future.

It should also be noted that the visit to Washington was the first leg of a greater journey that included an unprecedented tour of the capitals of the Gulf States. A successful first visit to the United States as prime minister focused the attention of the leaders of the Gulf States on Mr. Abe's diplomatic initiatives and highlighted Japan's international position. Using one visit to frame another represents a new diplomatic strategy. Such sophistication will serve Mr. Abe well in the coming years. 

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