



Washington Japanwatch / Tough times will test alliance

May 31, 2005

Weston S. Konishi / Special to The Daily Yomiuri

As if Japan-South Korea ties were not troubled enough, Vice Foreign Minister Shotaro Yachi made matters worse on May 11 with an astonishing gaffe during a meeting with a delegation of South Korean National Assembly members visiting Tokyo. Yachi told the delegation that although the United States shares a wide range of intelligence information with Japan, Tokyo cannot relay that intelligence to South Korea because Washington does not fully trust Seoul.

The remark was careless not only because it played into South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun's self-fulfilling prophecy of a "diplomatic war" with Japan. It was also careless because it revealed an overconfidence in some circles of Japanese officialdom regarding their close partnership with the United States. However pervasive this sentiment is, it is foolish to assume that the good times in Japan-U.S. alliance relations will last forever or can be flaunted in front of other allies. It may only be a matter of time when Japan is no longer the apple of Washington's eye.

Japan's contributions to the alliance with the United States, including participation in the antiterrorism campaign and the reconstruction of Iraq, have established a promising precedent for future bilateral cooperation and won Washington's recognition as a dependable ally.

Yet it is important to consider the context in which many of these measures were accomplished--that is, in an ad hoc response to crises, when time was of the essence and prolonged political debate would have cast deep doubt on the Japan-U.S. alliance. It was under these circumstances that Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi pushed through the deployment of Self-Defense Forces troops to Iraq in December 2003 and bypassed a potentially larger Diet debate over constitutional restrictions to collective security.

The next phase of Japan-U.S. alliance cooperation, however, is less likely to be pushed along by crisis response than by long-term strategic planning that will require complex legal, political and joint operational

issues to be thoroughly worked out between Tokyo and Washington. These are precisely the kind of issues that have hampered the bilateral alliance in the past and that Tokyo has not always been able to deal with to U.S. satisfaction.

A major sticking point that may arise in the near future, for instance, is the base realignment plan that U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld proposes for forward-deployed U.S. forces in Japan. Negotiations are under way between U.S. and Japanese officials regarding the timetable and other details of the realignment, including the proposed relocation of the U.S. Army 1st Corps headquarters from Washington State to Camp Zama, Kanagawa Prefecture.

However, even if alliance negotiators are able to reach a deal, it is not a foregone conclusion that Tokyo will be able to meet U.S. expectations for a timely realignment of bases. The Japanese government will have to campaign vigorously with local authorities, who can complicate the closure and relocation of bases.

If the experience of negotiating with Okinawa Prefecture is any guide, this process is likely to be painful at best and a failure at worst. Futenma Air Station is in its original location 10 years after a proposal to relocate the base. Washington must be prepared to be patient, but patience is not what Rumsfeld has in mind for transforming U.S. forces in Asia.

Another potential obstacle is the outcome of the debate over Japan's Constitution and use of collective self-defense. Media reports have exaggerated Japan's evolution into a "normal" nation. The Diet debate over Japan's pacifist Constitution begins in earnest this year. Even if Koizumi is able to spend whatever political capital he has in the remaining days of his term, the final version of the constitution is likely to be a different document than Washington ideally wants--a somewhat looser interpretation of the right to engage in collective self-defense, yet not a manifesto for unbridled participation in international contingencies.

It is not just Washington that has unrealistic expectations of the alliance. Statements by some Diet members and other Japanese decision-makers suggest an implicit expectation that Washington now owes Japan for its contributions to Iraq and the war on terrorism. In other words, there is a view in some Tokyo circles that there is an unwritten quid pro quo, and that it is now Washington's turn to concede to Japan on the Status of Forces Agreement, to be more sympathetic toward constitutional restrictions on future SDF deployments, and to provide unequivocal support for Japan's bid for a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council.

While many Japanese may see this as a natural conclusion, it is certainly not shared by the United States. Washington has never seen Japan's assistance in Iraq or elsewhere as anything but the responsibility of an ally in a time of need. On the contrary, Japan's contributions have only created the impression in Washington that Japan is no longer taking a "free ride" on its security obligations. The United States therefore seems destined to disappoint those Japanese who regard their nation's recent military contributions as a reciprocal arrangement and expect U.S. acquiescence on a range of alliance issues.

Unrealistically high expectations are a concern for the long-term health of the Japan-U.S. alliance, but they are also a sign of the success the alliance has enjoyed over the past several years. Officials on both sides of the Pacific must take a cautious approach not to overestimate the recent momentum in cooperation and take the alliance for granted. Much work--perhaps the hardest and most complex yet--is left to be done in order to advance bilateral cooperation to the next level. A dose of modesty will help officials on both sides navigate the alliance through rough seas rather than just the calm ones.

Konishi is program director at the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation.

