

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

Bush pushing Japan over the brink

The growing rift between United States and Japan is due to the U.S. "superpower condominium" policy.

Relieved by the victory of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party in the recent Japanese lower house elections, the Bush administration was at pains to play down the growing friction between the U.S. and Japan as the President was preparing to meet Prime Minister Toshiko Kaifu in Palm Springs, California on March 2-3.

Journalists are notorious for conjuring up hostilities where they don't exist, and there has been no dearth of articles weighted with foreboding about the future of relations between the two nations. The *Washington Post* headlined a recent three-part series, "U.S.-Japanese Ties Seen at Lowest Point Since War."

Some Washington pundits say it is a lot of smoke and mirrors designed to rev up the stagnant U.S. economy. Gorbachov having robbed the U.S. of a formidable enemy against which to maintain vigilance, the Japanese are being ushered in to take the place of the Soviets. But all in good fun, these pundits say, because economic competition is the name of the new game, rather than thermonuclear "chicken," and its object is more to stimulate economic reform than really to bash the Japanese.

Reality, however, militates against such a pedestrian view of the very real problems that loom on the near-term horizon of U.S.-Japanese relations, and if measures are not taken to change the current course, a shipwreck is almost certain.

Because the governments of both sides hope to avoid this shipwreck, neither has been willing to make too much of the deadlocked "Structural Impediments Initiative" (SII) trade

talks, which are mandated to produce an interim report in early April and a final report over the summer.

It is well known that the U.S. is pushing hard to correct the \$49 billion deficit it has in trade with Japan by demanding Japan move to break up monopolies, open up its distribution system, and stimulate its economy by reversing the recent trend of raising interest rates.

It is also known that the Japanese are much more vocal about demanding the U.S. clean house if it wants to correct the trade imbalance. They point to the low levels of U.S. reinvestment in long-term research and development and the low U.S. savings rate, for example.

Not so well known is the sea-change occurring, most significantly in the people of Japan, which could send any peaceful resolution of these trade talks up in smoke. Senior U.S. officials are saying on background that their most important concerns center on the Japanese perception that the U.S. is no longer a reliable ally. This, senior U.S. officials say, was the real reason for Defense Secretary Richard Cheney's trip to Japan, and the swift invitation to the U.S. that Kaifu received from Bush right after the Japanese election.

"We have to convince the Japanese that we still consider ourselves a Pacific power, and that our strategic alliance with them is as important to us as it has ever been," one official said. Japanese trust in these propositions was shaken, of course, by the U.S. decisions to cut back its military forces in the Pacific, and by the apparent willingness, voiced by Cheney, to

let the leases lapse on the U.S. bases in the Philippines if that government is unwilling.

The Japanese have been most concerned about Bush's policy toward Communist China since last summer. Against the backdrop of a long history of acrimony toward China, many Japanese view Bush's "kowtow" approach to the Beijing regime with alarm. Bush made one off-hand remark during a press conference recently that sent Japanese worries to new heights, suggesting that the U.S.-P.R.C. relationship might be the linchpin of U.S.-Asian relations. Administration officials have said that Bush has deemed it urgent to allay the fears that the comment raised in Japan.

Japanese concern has also been fueled by exaggerated reports in Japanese newspapers about plans for the U.S. to completely withdraw militarily from Okinawa, for example. Bush called Kaifu over to Palm Springs to assure him on that. But the fact remains that the primary foreign policy goal of the U.S. administration is to fashion a new global condominium among the superpowers, which ranks all other relations second behind U.S.-Soviet and U.S.-P.R.C. relations.

So, what Japan is being told to do by the U.S. is not to play by new rules of the U.S.-Japanese alliance, but by the new rules of the U.S.-Soviet and U.S.-China global pact. As the Japanese catch on to what this means for them, their rift with the U.S. will widen. One area where the Japanese will put the U.S. to the test has to do with the Japanese-Soviet dispute over the islands just north of Japan. Now that the Soviets admit there is a "legitimate dispute" over who owns the islands, the U.S. must give more than only lip service to the Japanese claim, Japanese analysts contend.