

Why Japan prefers Bush

By GLEN S. FUKUSHIMA

With the U.S. presidential election less than two months away, interest is building globally in the likely outcome and its impact on America's role in the world.

The common wisdom is that most foreign governments are hoping President George W. Bush will lose in his bid for re-election on Nov. 2. This view is based less on evidence of support for Massachusetts Sen. John F. Kerry, the Democratic Party presidential candidate, than on the notion that the Bush administration has alienated even long-standing U.S. allies by its ignorance, arrogance, and unilateralism.

A curious exception is Japan. Ever since assuming office in April 2001, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi has fostered a close and cooperative relationship with Bush, so much so that many here compare it to the "Ron-Yasu" relationship of 1982-1987 between U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone. According to Japanese diplomats, "U.S.-Japan relations have never been better than they are now."

In contrast to this amicable relationship on the governmental level, opinion polls reveal that the Japanese public is sharply critical of the United States. This public perception is reinforced by Japanese mass media accounts of U.S. foreign policy being "hijacked" by neoconservatives, the religious right and vested big business interests.

This bifurcation of Japan's perception of the U.S. raises several questions. First, why is the Japanese leadership so supportive of the Bush administration? Second, why is the Japanese public so critical? Third, why has this apparent contradiction not eroded domestic support for Koizumi?

On the Japanese leadership support for Bush, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has for decades felt more comfortable dealing with Republicans than with Democrats. The LDP and GOP enjoyed a strong alliance against communism during the Cold War and continue to share a politically and socially conservative agenda that embraces close ties with big business.

Many in the Japanese establishment prefer the order, stability, and exclusiveness represented by the GOP to the openness, inclusiveness, and diversity valued by Democrats. In addition, when Republicans are in the White House, Democrats tend to return to think tanks, law firms, and universities, whereas when Democrats occupy the White House, Republicans usually return to business and continue in the private sector to cultivate ties with their Japanese counterparts. Over time, this network of human relationships has given Japanese leaders a greater sense of familiarity and assurance with Republicans (e.g., Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage) than with most Democrats.

Another reason Japanese leaders prefer Bush is their bitter experience with the Clinton administration. When President Bill Clinton assumed office in January 1993, the U.S. economy had not yet fully recovered, and

Japan was still seen as a formidable economic rival. The ensuing two years of intense bilateral trade negotiations evoked considerable resentment in Japan.

No sooner had these negotiations run their course in June 1995 when, in September, three U.S. servicemen stationed in Okinawa were charged with the brutal rape of a 12-year-old Okinawan girl, further fueling Japanese hostility toward the U.S. And the Asian financial crisis, triggered by the collapse of the Thai baht in July 1997, led to the U.S. hectoring Japan to stimulate domestic demand and to play the role of a "locomotive" to spur Asian economic recovery, again, pressure that grated on Japan.

Japan's positive experiences with the GOP in the 1980s and negative experiences with the Democrats in the 1990s have led many leaders here to conclude that Japan's interests will be better served by having a Republican, rather than a Democrat, in the White House.

Republicans reinforced this Japanese mind-set during the 2000 U.S. presidential election by warning that a Gore administration would damage Japan, on two counts. First, Gore would be urged by labor unions and environmentalists to pursue a protectionist trade policy, contrary to Japanese economic interests. Second, Gore would follow his predecessor in seeking a "strategic partnership" with China, to Japan's detriment. Clinton's nine-day trip to China in 1998 -- bypassing Japan -- led credence to this view.

The Democratic response to these GOP diplomatic efforts has been, "So who cares what the Japanese think? They don't vote in our election." This kind of insular thinking may have led LDP secretary general Shinzo Abe to reciprocate on his trip to Washington D.C. in April this year by meeting with a large number of U.S. political leaders, but not with a single Democrat.

As is often the case in politics, perceptions can eclipse facts. For instance, Clinton visited Japan five times as president -- three times more than any of his predecessors -- indicating that he may in fact have valued ties with Japan more than many Japanese were willing to admit.

Furthermore, the "Ron-Yasu" relationship was possible because Nakasone was prime minister for five years during the Reagan administration, just as Koizumi's relationship with Bush is based on his having been prime minister for more than three years during the Bush administration. By contrast, the Clinton administration saw a procession of seven Japanese prime ministers in eight years -- not much time to develop lasting friendships.

The question of why Japanese public opinion has turned negative against the U.S. is not hard to fathom. The unilateralism of the Bush administration on the Kyoto Protocol, International Criminal Court, Biological Weapons Convention, Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and a host of other issues had already set the tone during the first few months of 2001. Although the events of Sept. 11 that year elicited an outpouring of Japanese sympathy and support for the U.S., this quickly changed to criticism for invading Iraq on March 19 last year without first securing a broad international consensus.

The more interesting question is why, unlike Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain -- who has suffered domestically for supporting Bush's policy in Iraq -- Koizumi has not suffered a comparable drop in his

approval ratings. One reason is that Iraq is so geographically remote from Japan that domestic issues, such as pension reform, take precedence in the minds of the Japanese public.

But a more salient factor is North Korea. Many Japanese believe that Koizumi has no choice but to support Bush on Iraq in order to secure his cooperation with Japan on North Korea. Some may question this logic, since the Bush administration is likely to pursue its policy toward Kim Jong Il regardless of what Japan says or does. But there is a strongly held view in Japan that support for the U.S. in Iraq -- including the dispatch of Self-Defense Forces -- is essential to secure U.S. support for Japan on such issues as the Japanese nationals abducted by North Korea.

Ongoing tensions with China on the issue of Japanese responsibility for its colonial past and with Russia on the issue of the Northern Territories add to the sense of Japanese vulnerability. In effect, Japan's uneasy relationships with North Korea, China, and Russia mean that for Japan, having a U.S. administration that takes a tough stance toward these countries -- but without raising unnecessary tensions in the region -- is preferable to one that tries to improve U.S. ties with them, especially if these efforts are not closely coordinated with Japan.

As in 2000, the Japanese leadership and some elements of the mass media are already predicting dire consequences for Japan should Democrats win in November. These include tumbling stock prices, trade protectionism and a cozying up or a clash between the U.S. and China -- either of which would put Japan in a difficult position, with the former resulting in Japan feeling excluded and the latter resulting in Japan being forced to side with one of its two top economic partners.

Since the end of the Cold War, economic globalization has accelerated, spawning countless studies, conferences and publications on the subject. The globalization of domestic politics, on the other hand, has not received the attention it deserves. With the U.S. and Japan accounting for more than 40 percent of the world's gross domestic product, it is only natural that growing economic interpenetration will impinge on the domestic politics of both nations.

Perhaps more than any other U.S. election in recent memory, the outcome of Nov. 2 will be affected by factors outside the U.S. At the same time, the election results will profoundly shape America's role in the world over the next four years to eight years. It is no wonder, then, that the counting of the ballots on Nov. 2 is likely to be top news around the world, including here in Japan. We are indeed witnessing the globalization of domestic politics.

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