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By Jason Miks

Too Close for Comfort? Will Japan under Shinzo Abe finally be able to shed its image as a U.S. satellite state?

Last month British Prime Minister Tony Blair delivered his final speech as Labour leader to the annual party conference. Well-judged and eloquent, it was good enough to make one forget his low approval numbers and left one wondering why he is being pressured to leave the office – despite unprecedented political successes.

One major reason is his relationship with U.S. President George Bush which has alienated even some of his moderate allies. The price of friendship between the two leaders, they argue, was being drawn into the ongoing and costly war in Iraq. But while Blair has been excoriated at times – at least in Britain – for his close relationship with Bush, he is not the only politician to have his friendship with the US administration questioned.

Until late last month, Blair shared the label of “lapdog” with then Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. Indeed, Koizumi’s decision to commit troops to Iraq took him out on a longer limb than Blair. Although Japan’s forces were limited to non-combatant roles, their deployment still set off a fierce debate at home as use of military force in international disputes is expressly barred by Article 9 of the Japanese constitution. And military co-operation between the US and Japan is likely to grow closer still as Japan acts with growing national confidence and heightened concerns over North Korea’s military activities.

The close working relationship that Koizumi and Bush struck up was much in evidence during Koizumi’s trip to the U.S. in June, with the Japanese leader’s reception noticeably warmer than that offered China’s President Hu in April. And this closeness has extended well beyond the military sphere.

In counter terrorism the two have worked closely on projects such as the Container Security Initiative and in terms of trade Japan is the United States’ fourth largest partner. The warm relation between the two leaders corresponded with the broadly favourable view of the US held by many Japanese – 63 per cent, according to a recent Pew Global Attitudes study.

Growing up in the immediate post war period, Kazuhiro Suzuki speaks for many of his generation when he talks of the appreciation he feels for US reconstruction efforts following World War II. “We owe a lot to America,” he

told me when I asked his opinion of the occupation. “We imported ideas from them, technology, and they gave us our constitution.”

Indeed he thinks the close security cooperation has been hugely beneficial for Japan’s development since World War II. “The relationship has been very good for Japan because we have not had to worry about defense. America provided that for us, which allowed us to invest in industry,” he added.

In the decade following the Second World War this bond was cemented by Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida, who believed that Japan’s well-being depended on maintaining close political ties with the United States, a focus on economic rebuilding and relying on the US for protection. This so-called ‘Yoshida Doctrine’ has been a dominant feature of Japan’s foreign policy landscape ever since, despite challenges from right and left.

Yet the Koizumi-Bush rapport masks a shift in recent years. Japan has been wrestling with its identity for decades. As its economic bubble burst and after the critical reception of its Gulf war chequebook diplomacy, the question of Japan’s role in the world and its relationship with the US has been hotly debated. Many Japanese feel that they are tied too closely to the US and, though grateful for the security this arrangement has provided, long for greater diplomatic independence.

Such independence has been more in evidence under Koizumi as Japan has been more willing to stand up for itself. A ban on beef imports from the U.S. to Japan – despite intense U.S. pressure – was upheld over BSE concerns. Japan’s refusal of a US request to bear 75 per cent of the costs of relocating 8,000 marines from Okinawa to Guam was another show of increasing self-assertion.

Akihiro Takahara, a 30 year old systems engineer from Aobadai, Kanagawa, believes this independence is a good thing. “I think the partnership between Koizumi and Bush has made the relationship more balanced,” he said. “If a prime minister always says yes, yes, yes, then this is bad. Koizumi has been much more willing to negotiate.”

Takahara sees the changing relationship as something that will continue to evolve as Japan grows in confidence.

“When my parents were growing up people wanted to have what America had. Many people were very poor,” he said when asked about these changing attitudes. “But now Japan is a richer and more advanced country than it was then. We have our own style now and don’t have to follow America as much.”

This change is still lost on some policymakers in the U.S. Congressman Henry Hyde, Chairman of the House International Relations Committee, earlier this year sent a letter to the US House of Representatives’ Speaker to press Koizumi to cease his controversial visits to Yasukuni shrine if he wanted to address Congress. Instead of a pledge to appease the influential congressman, the Japanese response was the diplomatic equivalent of a shrug of the shoulders.

What will be interesting now is to see if this shift continues under new Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Abe has already made an interesting break with precedent by making his first trip as leader to Beijing, not Washington.

Earlier this year, I asked the Political Minister Counsellor at the US embassy in Tokyo whether he thinks the close working relationship between the US and Japan will continue smoothly with the leadership change. He said he believes it will - that the two countries “have more in common than a common enemy” and that the close working relationship was not dependent on a personal relation but largely common values.

As Japan seeks to find its place in the world and becomes increasingly assertive, there will likely be more disputes with the US, regardless of who the respective leaders are. As if to point down that road, this year’s Pew survey also showed plummeting support amongst Japanese for the US-led “war on terror”. So long as the United States government remembers that having a independent minded ally is preferable to a browbeaten one and so long as the United States does not forget the importance of Japan over its understandable focus on China, the future for U.S.-Japanese relations and the Asia-Pacific realm look bright enough.

