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Japan's Security Council Diplomacy

What do Estonia, Latvia and Uganda all have in common? They all received their first ministerial level visits from a Japanese official last month. The visits mark the beginning of a new charm offensive aimed at improving links with General Assembly members, in order to secure support for Japan's bid for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

According to the Foreign Ministry, 82 countries have never been visited by a Japanese cabinet minister as of last month. The Cabinet Secretariat therefore picked about 20 of those countries and allocated them to ministers for visits over the summer. The trips are a response to the failure last year for Japan to secure adequate support for its joint proposal on UNSC expansion to reach a General Assembly vote.

Initially it looked like Japan could be making progress as it linked up with Brazil, Germany and India to form the so-called G4. They put forward a joint proposal to enlarge the Security Council from the current 15 members to 25, but were ultimately unsuccessful. Their suggestion was that they each receive permanent, but non-veto wielding, seats along with two, then still to be decided African countries. However the bid stumbled as the African Union rather shortsightedly insisted on having veto power. Introducing so many new veto wielding countries was never likely to go very far and – predictably – the bid petered out.

However, last month saw a renewed commitment to change with Japan's ambassador, Kenzo Oshima, calling at for early reform and expansion a General Assembly meeting. He also insisted that he was still working within the G4 framework, though the emphasis in the months following last year's failed effort seems to have been on courting U.S. support. Indeed, this culminated in a joint statement during Koizumi's recent trip to Washington in which the U.S. declared its strong support for Japan's candidacy.

That Japan is deserving of a permanent seat is unquestionable. It is the second largest contributor to the UN regular budget paying over 19 percent and its regular budget assessment far exceeds the combined contributions of China, France, Russia and the UK who together pay about a 15 percent share.

As the world's second largest economy and a democratic nation Japan craves - and ought to receive - recognition for its contributions to world affairs. And after being stung by accusations of checkbook diplomacy during the Gulf War, it has moved to

become a more active participant in peacekeeping operations despite its constitutional restrictions on the use of force. While there will always be those – especially in neighboring countries – who worry about Japan's Self Defence Forces playing an increasing role in the combat theatre, it was UN Secretary General Kofi Annan himself who expressed a desire for Japan to become more active in peacekeeping operations.

The sticking points to gaining a seat are two-fold, though. As Michael Meserve, political counsel at the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo, said to me in a conversation earlier this year, the United States supports Japan's candidacy, but it also doesn't want the Council to expand so much that it becomes unwieldy. America's support is therefore qualified.

Japan also has to contend with veto-wielding China, which is unlikely to support its efforts any time soon, especially with relations between the two countries at a low point. Indeed in large part because of Koizumi's insistence on visiting the controversial Yasukuni Shrine, the two leaders have not held summit talks in 5 years, a strange state of affairs for the regions' two great powers.

If Japan is to gain the support it requires for a permanent seat it will therefore have to do more than woo smaller nations, and this should probably begin with other Asian countries. It was noticeable that while Germany received strong backing from 11 European nations, the only three Asian countries which swung behind India and Japan's efforts were Afghanistan, Bhutan and the Maldives.

That the Security Council needs to undergo reform to increase its effectiveness and relevance is not in question – even its strongest supporters understand this. The problem is how best to carry this out without adding to the paralysis that has sometimes marked its decision making. If this can be done, it is upon Japan to persuade other nations and particularly its neighbors to let them pull up a permanent chair to the Security Council table. After 60 years of constructive contribution to the international community and often footing the bill, such a role seems the appropriate next step in Japan's assumption of international duties.

