

International Affairs Forum Interview

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By Jason Miks

W. Michael Meserve has been Minister Counselor for Political Affairs at the U.S. Embassy Tokyo since August 2005. He has worked for the Foreign Service in Asia for a quarter century, most recently as Deputy Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs; Director of the Office of Taiwan Coordination.

International Affairs Forum: The balance of power in Asia seems to have shifted over the last 15 years. How important a partner will Japan be to the US should this apparent shift continue?

Michael Meserve: Japan is a vital partner and by far our most important one in Asia. Economically it is three to three and a half times larger than China and six or seven times than India. We share common values such as democracy and a respect for human rights. We don't see that changing.

I would dispute the idea that the balance of power has changed. Instead I would argue that actually, especially in terms of ideas, the balance has shifted in our favour. Without minimising China's role, the balance of military power is still in favour of the US, and this is in fact much clearer now than it was say in 1985 with the presence of the Soviet Union.

IA-Forum: Some reports suggest the US is frustrated at the frosty relations Japan has with some of its neighbours. Do you feel that these relations could adversely affect US interests?

Michael Meserve: I think we're concerned any time there are tensions and friction

between important actors in a region. It is clear that for historical reasons tensions have risen, but this is something that these countries will need to work out for themselves.

IA-Forum: How actively is the US supporting Japan's bid for the Security Council and why do you feel Japan deserves a place?

Michael Meserve: We have said consistently and firmly that Japan belongs on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). It is the second largest contributor to the UN, is the second highest development assistant donor and has the second largest economy. Japan could play an extremely important role as a member of the UNSC. We have made and will continue to make that case to other countries and also within in the UN system to make the proposal a reality.

But it also needs to be remembered that the Security Council does work effectively and is actually one of the brightest spots of the system. Therefore wholesale increase in membership of the Council is not a proposal that the US is willing to support.

IA-Forum: What do you feel are the greatest challenges in the region and how can the US-Japan relationship help address these?

Michael Meserve: Terrorism is the most immediate threat and the US is working closely with Japan and other countries in the region to put in place effective measures. North Korea is also a key challenge.

Japan is assisting these efforts by sharing information. The most notable example of co-operation is the Container Security Initiative, which has been extremely important in preventing terrorists exploiting container shipments to the US. Japan lost between 50 and 100 citizens in the September 11th attacks and there therefore needs to be a coordinated response to terrorism. Japan's assistance will also be indispensable in putting together a response to stop the threat from North Korea.

On the economic front there is the rise of Chinese and Indian economies – the introduction of two new and very significant players on to the world economic stage poses significant challenges. Japan's economy is second only to the US and it is also the second largest consumer market. Any effective management of the global trade and financial systems – the World Bank, the WTO, etc. -- must therefore include Japan.

IA-Forum: How significant is the re-implementation of Japan's ban on the import of US beef?

Michael Meserve: The mistaken shipment of bone-in beef was an error that we just cannot excuse. However I would point out that the issue is not with the safety of US beef but with the reliability of US export inspection procedures. We will work with Japan to tighten procedures and make sure that Japan understands that when the US makes a promise it keeps its word.

IA-Forum: It is frequently noted that the Bush-Koizumi personal relationship, like the Bush-Blair relationship, appears very strong. Prime Minitser Koizumi is due to step down this year. Do you think this will have an adverse effect on US-Japan relations?

Michael Meserve: The US and Japan have more in common than a common enemy. Whether it is issues of security or trade we have more in common than just two men. A good personal relationship is of course desirable. But is it essential? I would say no. Is the fact that there is a change in leadership at least every 8 years in the US and more often in Japan a source of instability? I don't think so. I think the reason that President Bush gets along so well with Prime Ministers Koizumi and Blair is not necessarily based on a personal liking, but because they share common values which allow them to see many of the worlds problems in the same way and to co-operate on moving things forward.

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