

Bush visit to Japan cements closer ties against China

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The three-day visit to Tokyo by George Bush last week was used to consolidate Japan's support for a policy of "containing" China and to secure its diplomatic and military participation in the next stages of the US administration's "war on terrorism". The consequences will be profoundly destabilising and heighten tensions in East Asia.

Closer US ties with Japan were foreshadowed before the 2000 US election, in a report co-authored by Joseph Nye and Richard Armitage, now Bush's Deputy Secretary of State and main Asian policy advisor. Underpinning the document was an assessment that the greatest threat to American interests in Asia was China's growing ability to project economic, political and military power in the region. Its conclusion was that an active political and military role by Japan alongside the US would be essential in potential conflicts on the Korean peninsula, over Taiwan, in South East Asia or on the Indian subcontinent. Based on the Nye-Armitage report, Bush declared China a "strategic competitor" and attacked Clinton during the election campaign for downplaying security relations with Tokyo.

In Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, the Bush administration has a Japanese leader who has been prepared, against considerable domestic opposition, to closely align with the US and push for the remilitarisation of Japan. After September 11, Koizumi rushed through anti-terrorism legislation to enable Japanese participation in the war on Afghanistan. Japanese warships are still operating alongside US forces in the Indian Ocean, and 700 troops are now being sent to join the ongoing UN operation in East Timor.

In late January, Koizumi sacked his popular foreign minister Makiko Tanaka, the main opponent in his cabinet of a stronger relationship with the US. From the time the cabinet was formed last April, Tanaka clashed publicly and privately with Koizumi over the policies of the Bush administration, Koizumi's endorsement of nationalist school history textbooks and his controversial visit to the Yasukuni war shrine. Her removal from the government has strengthened the position of Koizumi's Fukuda faction of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)—its most right-wing and traditionally anti-China grouping.

The broad agreement that exists between the two administrations was on display during Bush's stay in Tokyo. At times, the leaders' praise for one another reached absurd proportions. The *Los Angeles Times* called it a "mutual lovefest", while the *New York Times* was "left with the impression of one long bearhug".

In sharp contrast to many European leaders, Koizumi utilised the opportunity to endorse Bush's State of the Union speech and signal that Japan is prepared to take part in the next round of US military aggression.

On February 18 he declared: "The expression 'axis of evil'

expresses the firm resolve of President Bush and the United States against terrorism. President Bush has been very calm and cautious vis-à-vis Iraq, Iran and North Korea. He will not exclude any possibilities in order to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and to prevent terrorism. I understand it's going to be drawn out and a tough fight. And Japan, together with the United States and the international community, will, on its own initiative, cooperate very actively."

Bush used an address to the Japanese Diet or parliament the following day to declare Japan had an "indispensable role" in the "war on terrorism", a role that was "global and begins in Asia". In a pointed affront to both China and Europe, Bush declared the 21st century would be a "Pacific century" upheld by the military and economic power of the US-Japan security alliance.

Bush asserted the US was "more committed than ever to a forward presence in the region", naming Australia, the Philippines and Thailand, alongside South Korea and Japan, as America's military allies in Asia. New threats were made against North Korea over its alleged possession of "weapons of mass destruction". China was issued a warning that the US would "remember our commitments to the people on Taiwan". Bush stressed that, "to protect the people of this region, and our friends and allies in every region", the US would continue with the National Missile Defense (NMD) project.

Taken as a whole the speech indicates a more aggressive US stance towards China. It cuts across Beijing's ambition to reunify the island of Taiwan, as well as its hopes of detente on the Korean peninsula and its territorial claims in the South China Sea. China is increasingly encircled by American bases and military allies. Its small arsenal of nuclear weapons will be undermined by the NMD and it confronts a resurgence of Japanese militarism, the very force that invaded China in the 1930s at the cost of 20 million Chinese lives.

That the White House views Japan as a key strategic partner was reflected not only in Bush's promotion of Koizumi but also his willingness to downplay economic and trade issues.

Bush's enthusiasm for the Japanese leader is not shared in some US corporate circles. While Koizumi was hailed when he rose to power, he has failed to deliver on his promises to push through a long-demanded economic deregulation of the Japanese economy. Instead, as the country has slumped toward its third recession in a decade, Koizumi has lurched back toward the traditional protectionist policies of the conservative factions of the LDP. His government has tacitly encouraged the devaluation of the yen, improving the position of Japanese exporters at the expense of American and Asian competitors. The US National Association of Manufacturers has complained that the falling yen "amounts to a global tariff of about 30 percent".

Within Japan, those sections of the media and business that backed him as a “reformer” are now turning against him. His rift with Tanaka, a populist advocate of deregulation and breaking up the LDP factions, has sent his popularity plummeting.

Bush, however, threw the weight of his administration behind the Japanese leader. He told the press: “I am not here to give advice, I am here to lend support”. Koizumi, Bush informed the Japanese parliament, was restoring “prosperity and economic growth through fundamental reform and the full embrace of competition”. Apart from a fleeting reference to “devaluation,” which was later put down to a gaffe, he made no public mention of the falling yen, disregarding the concerns of such US conglomerates as the Big Three auto companies.

An article in the *Australian Financial Review* commented: “The US has decided to absorb some of Japan’s recessionary pain—about \$US35 billion worth—and let Tokyo export some more of it to the other economies of East Asia.... Why is the Bush administration doing all this to help Japan? Partly because it wants to help an ally; partly because it believes it is important for international stability to help Japan arrest its deepening deflation; partly because it hopes this will encourage Tokyo to pursue restructuring. But the trump, as explained by the senior fellow at the Institute for International Economics in Washington, Adam Posen, is this: ‘The Bush administration’s national security team wants Japan with us against China, and they have won the argument...’ In sum, the Bush administration wants a strong Japan to help it manage a rising China.”

A lower yen will add to the regional antagonisms as it will put pressure not only on US manufacturers but on Asian export economies, especially South Korea, Taiwan and China. Beijing clashed sharply with Tokyo over trade matters last year and may retaliate against the falling yen with a devaluation of its own currency, the yuan. In the military sphere, China is likely to respond to closer US-Japan ties with increased defence spending and efforts to develop its own alliances.

In Japan, a discussion has opened up in ruling circles about exploiting Bush’s “axis of evil” speech to dispense with the constitutional constraints on Japan’s armed forces. The conservative *Yomiuri Shimbun* editorialised on February 19 on the necessity for a “permanent [anti-terrorism] law, anticipating that the US finally will decide to use force against Iraq.” Such a law would effectively bypass the pacifist clause of the Japanese constitution as any military action could be presented as “self-defence” against terrorism.

There are indications that Koizumi is collaborating with the Bush administration to facilitate a second Persian Gulf War and thereby his own remilitarisation agenda. An unnamed US official told the *Washington Post* that Japan had agreed to “discuss our concerns with the Iranian government and see if the people who are reasonable can get the other folks under control”. One US concern is that Iran makes no attempt to intervene during or after any American attack on Iraq.

The Japanese government is well placed to apply pressure on Iran. Japan lifted sanctions on the country in 1997 and any re-imposition will have a severe impact on its economy. A consortium headed by the state-owned Japan National Oil Corporation has signed contracts to develop a major oilfield in exchange for long-term supply contracts. Other Japanese transnationals, such as Mitsubishi, are pursuing investments in Iranian gas, petrochemical and transport projects.

The Koizumi government is also adjusting its policy towards North Korea to square with the hostile stance taken by the US. An alleged North Korean threat was one of Koizumi’s central arguments for legislation this month further expanding the external and internal

powers of the Japanese military.

While Koizumi has stated that his administration would like to normalise relations with North Korea, the opposite has been the case. In early November, Japan announced it was not sending promised food assistance to North Korea. Later that month, police raided the General Association of Korean Residents, the de-facto North Korean embassy in Japan, over allegations of a financial scandal. On December 20, the Japanese government called off scheduled talks with Pyongyang because it had ended a search for Japanese citizens who, Tokyo alleges, were kidnapped by North Korean spies in the 1970s. Two days later, on December 22, the Japanese Coast Guard pursued and sunk an unidentified ship in Chinese-claimed waters on the grounds it was a North Korean spy boat.

An unpredictable state of affairs now exists on the Korean peninsula. China had enthusiastically supported the “sunshine policy” of South Korean president Kim Dae-jung and urged the Pyongyang regime to enter into a detente. By isolating Pyongyang, Bush has created political instability in South Korea and greatly increased the pressure on North Korea, which is already facing a social and economic disaster. A political collapse in the North, which borders China’s northern provinces, is viewed in Beijing as a fundamental threat to its security.

There is, however, far from universal support in Tokyo for the reckless policies emanating from Washington. Sections of the ruling elite are openly questioning whether Japan is best served by supporting the US administration and its “war on terrorism”. Warning that the Bush administration is likely to find itself “increasingly friendless” if it attacks Iraq, the February 20 editorial of the *Asahi Shimbun* asked: “Will Japan alone ‘always be with the US’ under such circumstances?”

The day after Bush left Japan, Makiko Tanaka broke her silence and publicly criticised Koizumi. Specifically condemning him for sabotaging her work as foreign minister, she told a parliamentary inquiry into the circumstances of her dismissal: “I feel the prime minister has chosen to join the anti-reform forces. The people around him are bad.” Her break with Koizumi provides a possible focus for those in Japanese ruling circles who want to see a government in Tokyo that will aggressively and independently pursue Japanese interests within the region and internationally.



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