Bittersweet Summit...But Not a Bad Starting Point Given the Enormous Challenges Ahead

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Although the June 30 U.S.-Japan summit was destined for success, given each leader's need for the other's cooperation, the "good chemistry" President Bush and Prime Minister Koizumi displayed at their meeting at Camp David deserves credence, as it confirms the importance of the U.S.-Japan alliance and the two nations' partnership for economic growth.

For President Bush, the importance of Japan as a major ally in East Asia cannot be overstated, given the shift in U.S. strategic concerns from Europe to Asia. Japan's recovery from its economic anemia is of paramount importance, especially with the precarious economic situation in the United States. For his part, Prime Minister Koizumi has vowed to tackle Japan's economic issues head on, departing from his predecessors' failure to address these issues in any real way. Although the prime minister currently enjoys a surprising approval rate exceeding 80 percent, a U.S. endorsement of his economic structural reform is desperately needed as he attempts to carry those reforms out, given potential resistance from his own party. When these factors are viewed in light of the Bush administration's criticism of its predecessor's "preaching" stance regarding Japanese economic recovery, there would seem to be a window of opportunity for the two leaders to move their governments toward a solution.

The Bush-Koizumi summit success, coupled with the two other successful bilateral meetings at the secretary-minister level-Powell-Tanaka and Rumsfeld-Nakatani-will help put the United States at ease regarding the policy direction of Japan's new administration. The Japanese foreign minister's criticism of the U.S. missile defense proposal, as well as her reported "pro-China" attitude, had many concerned that it reflected Japan's potential departure from the alliance.

Two specific issues, however, cast a shadow over this otherwise successful summit: the Kyoto Protocol and the Okinawa rape incident. At the summit, Koizumi indicated that Japan would not implement the Kyoto Protocol, a UN treaty on global warming, without U.S. participation. The Bush administration has already vowed that it will not ratify it. And although the European Union has pressed Japan to ratify the treaty, irrespective of U.S. actions, Koizumi may scrap the Kyoto Protocol in order to get U.S. endorsement of his economic reform plan—his first priority.

The Okinawa rape incident has greater potential to shake the U.S.-Japan relationship, since it involves an underlying and deeply rooted misperception on the part of both countries' publics. On July 6, the United States handed over to Japanese authorities a U.S. serviceman accused of raping a woman in her 20s. (He claims that the incident was consensual.) During the coordination between the U.S. and Japanese authorities, a perception gap on the issue widened, particularly as seen in the media. Both the Japanese government and the media expressed discontent with the perceived slow pace at which the United States was moving. They did this, however, without acknowledging the difficult situation the Bush administration was facing vis-à-vis military issues (i.e., after the administration's sudden termination of Naval training in Vieques, Puerto Rico). For its part, the United States was frustrated with what it perceived as inadequacies in individual rights in Japan, based on a distrust of the Japanese judicial system. (The U.S. media ran reports on the shortcomings of the Japanese system, almost as if Japan were an "authoritarian nation.")

The summit confirmed the close ties between the United States and Japan at the governmental level, and it established bilateral working-level mechanisms. The next challenge is to explore common interests at a national level, something that will be, in part, the media's responsibility. Despite the problems represented by the environment and Okinawa, the summit was not a bad start for these two new leaders, as both countries attempt to tackle enormous global challenges. There is clearly the potential for both leaders and administrations to attain their goals.
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