

Japan's National Strategy Going in the Air

By **TAKUBO Tadae**

Not only with a rapid decline in approval rating, but also with a weak international reputation, the Fukuda administration is beset with troubles both at home and abroad. This is largely because of FUKUDA's lack of a clear vision in terms of what role Japan intends to (or not to) play in international society and what sort of messages Japan wants to (or deliberately not to) send out to the world.

Since his inauguration, Prime Minister FUKUDA Yasuo has been promoting the idea of the "synthesis of the Japan-US alliance and Japan-Asia relations." While not necessarily putting a strong emphasis on the relationship with the US, his first visit abroad was to Washington DC, which is a clear contrast from former Prime Minister ABE Shinzo, who saw the US-Japan alliance as of primary importance to Japan's national interest yet paid his first visit to China. In his meeting with US President George W. BUSH, FUKUDA also referred to the idea of "synthesis," though the president did not seem to have understood what exactly his Japanese counterpart was talking about. Successive Japanese prime ministers have repeatedly referred to such ideas as "maintaining" or "strengthening" US-Japan relations without necessarily clarifying what they mean. US administrations must have been annoyed by such vague statements. "Synthesis" is a new addition to such a fruitless tradition.

After FUKUDA's visit to Washington, French President Nicolas SARKOZY and German Chancellor Angela MERKEL also had meetings with President BUSH. These two European leaders seemed to receive warmer welcomes than FUKUDA. First of all, while FUKUDA was invited to the White House, the other two were taken to more welcoming locations. SARKOZY, for example, was invited to Mount Vernon, home of the first US president, George WASHINGTON. Similarly, MERKEL was invited to Crawford, Texas, where President BUSH's ranch is located. Looking at the length of each meeting, FUKUDA met with the president for the shortest time. Also, it should be noted that in press conferences after meeting with SARKOZY and MERKEL, President BUSH clearly extended his warm welcome to the two European leaders, which FUKUDA did not seem to receive. Finally, in terms of the agendas discussed in the meeting, while the two European leaders discussed issues with great international implications, such as Iran, Iraq, Kosovo, Lebanon,

and the peace process in the Middle East, FUKUDA's meeting focused on relatively less significant issues, such as North Korea, the abduction issue, and BSE.

This is not to deny the importance of, say, the abduction issue. At the same time, however, one should recognise that there are issues other than North Korea, which have greater implications for international society and, therefore, should receive greater international attention. Iran, for example, enjoys close relationships with Shia militias led by Muqtada al-Sadr, Syria, Hizbollah, and Hamas. Iran's heavy oil reserves are also a factor that makes this issue everyone's utmost concern. Iran's nuclear armament, if realised, would have even more significant ramifications than North Korea's nuclear development could possibly have. Focusing on issues of less international significance might have made FUKUDA appear as a less reliable partner to President BUSH than the European leaders, who clearly appreciated what issues should receive greater attention.

In China, HU Jintao has established his hold on power and made a great step forward. Russian President Vladimir PUTIN, even after his step down next March, is expected to continue exerting strong influence as Prime Minister. In South Korea, a new pro-US president has been elected to office. Within three months, Taiwan is going to elect its new leader. In the context of such dramatic developments, it is Japanese leaders that do not seem to have a clear vision in terms of where they are taking the country.

(This is the English translation of an article written by Mr. TAKUBO Tadae, Guest Professor of Kyorin University, which originally appeared on the BBS "Hyakka-Seiho" of JFIR on December 22, 2007.)