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INTERVIEW/ Leonard Schoppa: Economically weak Japan still has role to play

The Asahi Shimbun

This is the third of five interviews with prominent Americans and Japanese on the state of the Japan-U.S. alliance following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the United States. Leonard Schoppa was interviewed by Toshiaki Miura, an Asahi Shimbun correspondent based in the newspaper's American General Bureau in Washington, D.C.

Leonard Schoppa says most strategists in Washington view China as a potential long-term threat and that U.S. officials will continue to seek a non-Chinese key ally in Asia.

Q:It appears the Bush administration is hesitant to apply gaiatsu, or foreign pressure, on Japan. Do you think they learned a lesson from the Clinton administration?

A:I was one of the people who has been writing that gaiatsu works only sometimes, only when there's support inside Japan. The Clinton administration overestimated the ability to get the Japanese to make concessions purely based on threats. That clearly did not work and it was counterproductive in many ways. The Bush administration has probably overreacted on the cautious side, feeling that any public pressure was going to backfire.

Q:Does that overcautiousness have something to do with the composition of the administration?

A:The staffing of the Japan positions is heavily weighted toward people concerned with improving security relations and they have a long pattern of trying to keep the economic issues separate and of worrying that economic disputes could spill over and damage the security relationship. The key figure is Michael Green, head of the Japan section in the National Security Council. He's young and he appreciates the importance of the economic issues more than some of the older people. They are aware that an economically weak Japan

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is not going to be a very useful ally. I think there's a broad awareness in Washington that economic issues have security implications.

Q:How do you see the U.S. government's perception of Koizumi? Has it changed?

A:American administrations in general are going to be supportive of the ruling governments in their allied countries. Now, there's a lot lower expectation about what Koizumi can achieve, but it's also a realization that there are few alternatives. When you think of other scenarios, they would have to involve splits of the Liberal Democratic Party and that's such a long shot.

Q:What is the implication of the economic weakness on the security relationship?

A:There are a number of different scenarios that I can imagine. I think that putting up with American leadership with Japan a junior partner would not be so hard. However, they may tire of being the junior partner, especially if the Americans bully. Something that I think American strategic planners have long worried about is that the Japanese may decide it's more in their interest to become neutral or support a Chinese-led world order if the Americans become too bullying. The Japanese could end up in much more of a swing role and even a weaker Japan could end up with more leverage.

I think that there's quite a bit of room for the basic security relationship to continue, even with Japan's economic problems. Because even a weak Japan is still by far the strongest economic power in Asia. I think that most people in Washington expect that certainly there are opportunities to work out arrangements with the Chinese to avoid hostility, but they're not likely to emerge as the major cooperative partner for the United States in the region. They're more likely to be viewed as a potential long-term threat. Americans will continue to be interested in finding a non-Chinese key ally in the region.

Q:Do you think that the Anglo-American metaphor is a good way to show how the Japan-American relationship can be?

A:Even a smaller economy like Britain's is able to be a key ally and contribute in very important ways to the security relationship. If the Japanese deal with the economic problems and start to focus on their security contribution, (the Anglo-American metaphor) represents a realistic possibility over the next several years.

Q:Brent Scowcroft says that the British and the Americans are natural allies since they share a common language and heritage.

A:No, I don't quite accept that kind of language. They were leading

rivals for 100 years after the Revolutionary War. I think that alliance is very much a product of the security situation that the Americans have been faced with in the 20th century.

Q:Do you believe that Article 9 of the Constitution, which bans the exercise of the right of collective self-defense, stands in the way of a closer security relationship?

A:I think that is fundamentally a decision for the Japanese people to make. I think it's a good thing that even though many of the leading figures in the Bush administration strongly desire for Japan to change its Constitution and break those constraints, they have not overtly pushed the Japanese to do this.

It's completely appropriate to make sure that this is a Japanese decision. If the Japanese decide that for their security situation that continuing those constraints is their best choice, then I think that the Americans should be able to work with that.

* * *

Leonard Schoppa, 39, is associate professor at the University of Virginia's Department of Government and Foreign Affairs. He received his Ph.D. from Oxford University. His book ``Bargaining With Japan'' was highly acclaimed. Last fall, he published the article ``Japan, the Reluctant Reformer'' in Foreign Affairs magazine.The Asahi Shimbun Asia Network story is not available this week.(IHT/Asahi: April 19,2002)

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