

## Japan-Korea Relations: Engagement from Strength

Victor Cha  
Georgetown University

The big news for the quarter was the May summit between Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro and North Korean leader Kim Jong-il. Contrary to the pundits' assessment, the results of this summit were not half-bad (and not fully appreciated until after the six-party talks in June). They represented moderate successes for a U.S.-Japan strategy of engaging North Korea from a position of strength, not weakness.

### **The Summit**

The big news of the quarter was Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi's second summit meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong-il in Pyongyang (May 22). Like the first meeting in September 2002, the announcement came as a surprise. The key issue related to abductees, but unlike the first summit, this one had marginally positive results. These results could be measured along three dimensions: 1) inching closer to restarting Japan-DPRK normalization dialogue; 2) validation of Japan's firmer stance toward Pyongyang; and 3) the strength of Washington-Tokyo consultations on the nuclear problem.

The Japanese prime minister's 10-hour day in Pyongyang produced the return of two children of Kaoru and Yukiko Hasuike and the three children of Yasushi and Fukie Chimura, ending the 19-month separation after the repatriation to Japan of the abductees. According to de-briefings of the summit's proceedings, Kim Jong-il agreed to reopen investigations into 10 other disputed cases (eight were initially reported as dead and Pyongyang denied involvement in two others). The North Korean leader also agreed to maintain a moratorium on missile test launches.

In return, Japan committed to providing 250,000 tons of food aid to the UN World Food Program appeal for North Korea (the first such disbursement since 2001), as well as \$10 million worth of medical supplies. Koizumi urged Kim to accept international inspections of all its nuclear weapons programs and Pyongyang's return to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty regime. He renewed Japan's (perennial) request for the extradition of leftist radicals who defected after hijacking a Japan Airlines (JAL) plane in 1970, and may have been involved in other abduction cases involving Japanese nationals. Japan also provided assurances of Tokyo's continued adherence to the 2002 Pyongyang Declaration, which in operational diplomatic terms means Japan had no intention of imposing sanctions on the DPRK.

Koizumi's return from Pyongyang was received by many in Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo as nothing short of underwhelming. Critics blasted Koizumi's inability to secure the release of all of the relatives of the Japanese abductees (discussed below), while giving millions in medicines, humanitarian aid, and food. Moreover, the lack of any more definitive commitment by Kim to dismantle his nuclear weapons programs disappointed many observers. The token restatement of mutual adherence to the principles of the 2002 Pyongyang Declaration, critics argue, only highlighted the absence of any substantive progress on the issue. The *Yomiuri Shimbun* editorial, for example, decried the summit as making "no headway in resolving the abduction, nuclear, missile or any other issues related to Northeast Asia's peace and security." The *Mainichi Shimbun* blasted Koizumi for playing Japan's "trump card" (i.e., a second visit) and getting nothing in return. Okada Katsuya, head of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), criticized Koizumi's pledge to Kim that Japan would not implement economic sanctions as "a major diplomatic blunder."

But appearances can be deceiving. Koizumi's trip earned him a moderate (but not major) popularity boost domestically, with all three major Japanese dailies reporting some 60 percent public approval of the effort. Koizumi's inability to secure the release of all the abductees' relatives was not for lack of trying. Preparatory meetings in April took place involving unofficial talks in Beijing with Yamasaki Taku, former vice president of the Liberal Democratic Party, and Lower House member Hirasawa Katsuei. In May, this was followed by bilateral talks involving Yabunaka Mitoji (director general of Asian and Oceanian affairs) and Deputy Foreign Minister Tanaka Hitoshi in Beijing. Both sets of talks did much of the heavy lifting for the summit's results. Success in convincing LDP Secretary General Abe Shinzo (a hawk on North Korea) shortly after Tanaka and Yabunaka returned from Beijing to accept the provision of food aid (May 17) was another critical step in fostering the summit's outcome. Although criticisms came from certain circles for not getting more on the abductee issue (see Soga-Jenkins discussion below), there is no denying that the summit moved the ball forward on this huge impediment in Japan-DPRK relations.

Second, the one lesson the U.S. and Japan should take away from the summit is that moderate pressure on the Pyongyang regime works. Why? Since Kim Jong-il's ill-fated confession in September 2002 to his country's abductions of Japanese nationals, Tokyo has been pressing for the release of these individuals and their relatives. Japan's suspension of rice aid to North Korea (effective since 2001 when Japan provided \$104 million through the World Food Program) remained firm in no small part because of this unresolved issue.

Criticisms of Japanese weakness at the recent summit, therefore, may be inaccurate. Critics should not be asking why Koizumi reinstated food aid (which has been strictly held in abeyance as a result of the abductee issue), instead they should be asking why North Korea agreed *this time* to return the relatives when they had previously spurned Tokyo's entreaties.

The answer lies not in weakness, but in the *firmer stance* adopted by both the U.S. and Japan in curtailing North Korean illicit activities. In January 2004, the Diet passed foreign exchange legislation that would allow Japanese authorities – without a UN resolution – to cut off financial remittances to the North or to impose an import ban on North Korean goods. Shortly thereafter, a second piece of legislation banning North Korean port calls was deliberated on, accompanied by a three-month export ban on domestic trading companies potentially selling “dual-use” uranium enrichment materials to the North. Furthermore, Tokyo played a central role in recent maritime exercises in the Coral Sea by the U.S.-led Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), which aims to curtail the illicit transfer of weapons of mass destruction–related materials. In short, the food provided by Koizumi was always there for the taking if Kim Jong-il wanted it. What elicited the North’s release of some of the detainees were not just U.S. and Japanese carrots, but their sticks.

From Washington’s perspective, the fact that the summit’s results were not wildly applauded by the Japanese public is not entirely a bad thing. The public’s ambivalence with this trip pales in comparison to Koizumi’s first trip to Pyongyang in 2002, which boosted his approval ratings by some 30 points to nearly 70 percent according to some media polls in Japan. The lukewarm public reaction is good because it solves the “moral hazard” problem of DPRK diplomacy and the abductee issue – i.e., it ensures that Koizumi will not be tempted by short-term domestic-popularity gain to move too far afield from the U.S. position of “complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement” (CVID). It would have been much more worrying for the U.S. if Koizumi’s summit produced the same results to resounding applause in Japan because this would have created greater incentives for Japan to be more flexible with the North without receiving much in return.

### **Engagement from Strength, Not Weakness**

The net effect of Koizumi’s trip to North Korea, therefore, was far less problematic than many in media have reported. Pyongyang’s efforts to drive a wedge in the U.S.-Japan relations with the summit were unsuccessful. On the contrary, the summit proved that the U.S. and Japanese allied engagement strategy based on not just carrots but also sticks is effective in eliciting DPRK flexibility.

Japan’s summit with North Korea therefore represented a position of engagement based on strength, not weakness. The fact that the Diet passed key legislation allowing Japan to ban port calls by the DPRK ferry *Mangyongbong-92* to Niigata the week after the Pyongyang summit only reiterated the point. This form of muscular engagement had the effect of making the messages brought by Koizumi to President Bush at the G8 summit in Sea Island that much more credible. According to press reports, Koizumi recounted to the president that he posed stark choices for Kim Jong-il. The prime minister reportedly told Kim that DPRK gains from nuclear weapons pale in comparison to the gains to be had from dismantling all such programs. A Japanese premier who poses these choices as his Parliament prepares legislation allowing sanctions is infinitely more credible than one

who rationalizes engagement with North Korea as necessary because it cannot afford another crisis with the regime (sound familiar, Seoul?).

Koizumi relayed to President Bush that he believed North Korea was truly ready for talks (rather than bluster only). The fact that this advice registered with the president not only attests to how much Bush trusts Koizumi's judgment, but also was arguably the key factor that prompted the U.S. to move forward with its proposal at the six-party talks in Beijing. Indeed, the similarity in Japan's talking points to the U.S. position is manifest: (1) North Korea must freeze all nuclear programs including uranium enrichment programs; (2) North Korea must disclose information on all of its nuclear programs; (3) This freeze must entail efficient verification; and (4) Japan is ready to contribute to international energy assistance for North Korea only if these conditions are satisfied and if this freeze is a part of an agreement to dismantle North Korea's nuclear programs.

### **The Dog that Didn't Bark on Abductees**

The big non-event for the quarter regarding abductees was the unconsummated reunion between one of the abductees returned to Japan, Soga Hitomi and her husband Charles Robert Jenkins. Although the saga of the marriage between this Japanese abductee and U.S. Army defector has been recounted *ad nauseum* in Japanese media, this column has not indulged (until now). Jenkins was a U.S. Army sergeant conducting patrols on the DMZ in January 1965 when he apparently defected to North Korea. According to a recent *Los Angeles Times* report, Jenkins was heard shortly after his disappearance on DPRK propaganda broadcasts claiming he had defected to "paradise" in North Korea. Jenkins later appeared in other DPRK films where he was often utilized as a symbol of legitimacy for the North's superiority to imperialist America. When Kim Jong-il made the bombshell admission in his September 2002 summit with Koizumi that Pyongyang had been involved in abductions, one of the named abductees (Soga) was revealed to be the spouse of Jenkins. Since Soga's return to Japan, speculation has swirled over whether the U.S. would grant Jenkins a pardon and allow him and their two daughters to be reunited with Soga.

With the announcement of Koizumi's second trip to Pyongyang this quarter, many surmised that Japan would again request the U.S. allow a pardon (and not request extradition for court martial) of Jenkins so that he might be one of those returning with the prime minister. Pundits speculated that while a return of some of the abductee's children would score well, the return of Jenkins and family would constitute a "home run." Prior to the second Kim-Koizumi summit, newspapers recounted that Japan-DPRK negotiations on arranging a third-country reunion of the family was a critical prerequisite to restarting normalization dialogue. At one point in April during Kim Jong-il's trip to Beijing, the Chinese offered to host a reunion. At another moment in June, Malaysia offered to host such a reunion. Indonesia was also considered because it has diplomatic relations with the DPRK and does not have an extradition treaty with the United States. Hong Kong was considered (because Soga requested a place where English was spoken). To add to the melodrama, Koizumi sent a personal letter to Jenkins inviting him to reunite with his family.

The issue, frankly, got blown way out of proportion. While the individual story of Soga's separation from her family is sad, it pales in comparison to the other abduction cases that remain unresolved as well as the unexplained deaths of the confirmed cases (to his credit, Koizumi secured some assurances on the latter). A resolution of the Jenkins case, moreover, might make for great headlines, but would do little to drain the reservoir of mistrust between the U.S. and the DPRK on the nuclear dismantlement talks. Finally, one imagines that there must be more to U.S. obstinance than meets the eye. Unconfirmed reports that Jenkins may have participated on behalf of the DPRK in interrogations of captured U.S. servicemen during the *Pueblo* seizure in 1968 and other similar activities may help explain U.S. inability to look past a four-decade old army desertion.

## **War on Terror**

The quarter saw significant events by both Japan and South Korea in the war on terror. All of South Korea suffered through the detainment and eventual murder of Kim Sun-il at the end of June by terrorists. At the end of the quarter, blame was being levied at the Foreign Ministry and then the Blue House for failing to follow up earlier inquiries by foreign press about the possible detainment of a South Korean. While this certainly requires investigation, the larger and unfortunate point remains that earlier knowledge would not likely have made a difference in negotiations with terrorists. To Seoul's credit, the government of President Roh Moo-hyun beat back public emotional outcries to renege on its troop commitments to Iraqi reconstruction. This deployment of 3,600 troops to northern Iraq looks likely in August. To reconsider the decision would not only encourage terrorists to continue such abhorrent practices, but also would go against South Korean national interests as a major world power that seeks stability and some form of representative government and societies in the middle east. The latter point was not lost on many South Koreans as the demonstrations against the troop dispatch after Kim's murder were matched by counter-demonstrations calling for Korea not to cower in the face of terrorism as experienced in Iraq.

The quarter saw Japan's efforts in the war on terror continue. In mid-May two Maritime Self-Defense Forces destroyers quietly left for the Arabian Sea. The 7,250-ton destroyer *Kongo*, equipped with the *Aegis* advanced air-defense system, and the 4,550-ton destroyer *Ariake* will support operations to refuel U.S. and other foreign warships involved in operations in Afghanistan. On the domestic front, Japanese police arrested a ring of foreigners believed to be linked to an al-Qaeda suspect. A number of these were Bangladeshi, Indian, and Mali workers who had violated immigration laws and were suspected of ties to a French individual visiting Japan whom the U.S. has connected with al-Qaeda.

The U.S. again acknowledged in high-profile statements the contributions of allies Seoul and Tokyo in the global war on terror. Carrying forward the theme raised by President Bush in his one-year anniversary speech on the invasion of Iraq in March when he specifically cited the Japanese diplomat Oku Katsuhiko's death while working with the Coalitional Provisional Authority in Iraq, Vice President Cheney during his April swing

through Seoul and Tokyo highlighted the role played by Korea. Cheney referred to the ROK decision to send troops as “brave” and framing this dispatch in the context of a history of fighting together in Korea and Vietnam, he stated that “[Koreans] have been steady in their determination to protect freedom and democracy and you are doing so now ... America and South Korea are once again making sacrifices side by side.”

### **Seoul-Tokyo Relations Steady**

Relations between the allies, Japan and South Korea remained steady during the quarter. President Roh met with Foreign Minister Kawaguchi Yoriko and gave much credit to Koizumi’s efforts at cultivating the DPRK in May and for the U.S. proposal at the six-party talks in June. Arguably a crisis in trilateral coordination was averted as the absence of a U.S. proposal might have prompted the South Koreans, desperate for a breakthrough, to try something outlandish in hopes of breaking the deadlock.

Improvements in Seoul-Tokyo relations have been somewhat derivative of the status of each country’s relations with the common ally, the United States. Because Tokyo’s relations with Washington are quite close now, South Korea actively seeks Japanese counsel as it tries to manage its own troubled relationship with the U.S.

On history issues, this column has maintained that cooperation (or lack thereof) between Seoul and Tokyo should not be measured only in the number of times the two tangle over a historically based issue, but more importantly by the number of times the two governments consciously *avoid* confrontation over such issues. The quarter saw the latter form of cooperation take place when Japanese Coast Guard vessels turned back an attempt by ultra-rightwing nationalist groups to land a ship on the disputed Tokdo/Takeshima rocks and claim Japanese sovereignty.

## **Chronology of Japan-Korea Relations April-June 2004**

**April 1, 2004:** DPRK officials caution Japan not to enact legislation banning port calls by DPRK ships during unofficial talks in Beijing with Yamasaki Taku and Lower House member Hirasawa Katsuei.

**April 4, 2004:** Japan Foreign Minister Kawaguchi Yoriko announces Japan will hold trilateral talks with the ROK and Japan on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum in July.

**April 6, 2004:** ROK FM Ban Ki-moon and Japanese counterpart Kawaguchi hold phone conversation to discuss working level six-party talks on North Korea.

**April 7, 2004:** Fukuoka District Court rules that Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro’s August 2001 visit to Yasukuni Shrine was unconstitutional.

**April 7-8, 2004:** Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) meeting in San Francisco to discuss working-level talks on DPRK nuclear crisis attended by Yabunaka Mitoji, director of the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau of Japan's Foreign Ministry, South Korean Deputy FM Lee Soo-hyuck, and U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James Kelly.

**April 9-16, 2004:** Vice President Cheney Asia tour to Japan, China, and South Korea.

**April 20, 2004:** Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) head Charles Kartman visits Japan to discuss the suspended project to build two light-water nuclear reactors.

**April 22, 2004:** Jong Thae-hwa, DPRK chief negotiator on Japan, calls for the return of the Japanese abductees to North Korea.

**April 29, 2004:** State Department annual report on global terrorism mentions abduction issue for the first time as part of the context in which the DPRK remains on the state sponsors of terrorism list.

**April 30, 2004:** 4,000 rally in downtown Tokyo calling for Japanese government to take a harder line on DPRK abduction issue.

**May 2-3, 2004:** Japanese and North Korean delegates meet in Beijing for discussions on abduction issue and proposal for a visit by Koizumi to Pyongyang.

**May 6, 2004:** Japanese Coast Guard turns back Japanese ultraconservative group's attempt to land on disputed Tokdo/Takeshima rocks.

**May 7, 2004:** DPRK ferry *Mangyongbong-92* arrives at Niigata port amid protests by abductee's groups (third visit of the year by the ferry).

**May 10, 2004:** NGO advocates on behalf of abductees in Japan protest rumored visit of Koizumi to North Korea.

**May 12-15, 2004:** Six-party working group meetings held in Beijing.

**May 13, 2004:** *Kyodo News* reports that number of claims by overseas atomic bomb survivors has increased from 112 to over 800 this year after a 2002 court ruling in favor of an ROK atomic bomb survivor seeking government compensation with treatments.

**May 20, 2004:** DPRK ferry *Mangyongbong-92* leaves Niigata for Wonsan with 80 tons of humanitarian relief supplies for victims of April 22 train explosion in the DPRK.

**May 20, 2004:** Chief Cabinet Secretary Hosoda Hiroyuki announces that Koizumi will not meet abductees before his summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-il. Says he will meet them when he returns.

**May 22, 2004:** PM Koizumi visits Pyongyang to meet North Korean leader Kim Jong-il.

**May 23, 2004:** ROK FM praises Koizumi's meeting with Kim for helping reduce tensions on the Peninsula and in the region.

**May 24, 2004:** Japan-ROK fishing vessel altercation off Japan's Tsushima Islands.

**May 26, 2004:** Yabunaka Mitoji, director general of Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau, states in sessions of Foreign Affairs Committee that if North Korea conducts a missile test, Japan would not provide food aid promised at the Koizumi-Kim summit.

**June 1, 2004:** Diet bill banning port calls by North Korean ships passes House of Representatives transportation committee with the support of the ruling coalition and the largest opposition party.

**June 2, 2004:** *Nihon Keizai* reports that ROK officials believe North Korean *No-dong* missile deployments can strike anywhere in Japan, including Okinawa where U.S. forces are deployed.

**June 3, 2004:** *Kyodo News* reports that Beijing offered to host reunion of Soga family in China as an attempt to spur a breakthrough in Japan-DPRK talks.

**June 4, 2004:** FM Kawaguchi expresses hope to hold sideline meeting on abductee issue with North Korean counterpart Paek Nam Sun at July ARF meeting in Jakarta.

**June 7, 2004:** Yabunaka meets with PRC and ROK counterparts at Hakone, says six-party talks could be delayed until July.

**June 7, 2004:** In interview with *The New York Times*, Koizumi says that he told Kim Jong-il that North Korea must dismantle its nuclear weapons program and resolve abductions issue if it wants normalization with Japan and economic support.

**June 8, 2004:** President Bush and PM Koizumi hold working-level lunch at Sea Island prior to G8 summit. Bush praises Koizumi's efforts on the economy and on supporting multilateral process with North Korea.

**June 10, 2004:** G8 summit chairman's statement expresses support for Japanese efforts to resolve abductee problem with North Korea.

**June 11, 2004:** *Kyodo News* reports that a senior member of the pro-DPRK *Chosen Soren* residents' association in Japan will participate with the North Korean delegation for normalization talks with Japan.

**June 14, 2004:** Diet enacts legislation authorizing ban on port calls by ships deemed to pose a security threat, specifically targeting DPRK vessels.

**June 15, 2004:** FM Kawaguchi expresses hope that North Korea's negotiating position at upcoming six-party talks will reflect the forward-leaning stance of Kim Jong-il during his May 22 summit with PM Koizumi.

**June 16, 2004:** North Korean ferry *Mangyongbong-92* arrives at Niigata.

**June 21-22, 2004:** Six-party working-level talks begin in Beijing on DPRK nuclear crisis.

**June 23-26, 2004:** Six-party talks on DPRK nuclear dismantlement held in Beijing.

**June 24, 2004:** Japanese envoy Yabunaka and DPRK Vice FM Kim Gye Gwan hold bilateral talks on the sidelines of the six-party talks to discuss the family reunion of former abductee Soga Hitomi.

**June 28, 2004:** ROK President Roh Moo-hyun in luncheon with Japanese lawmakers commends Koizumi's efforts as critical to the marginally better prospects at the end of the third round of six-party talks.

**June 29, 2004:** Pacific Forum President Ralph Cossa ties the knot!