



Japan-Korea Relations:
Japan's Tragedy Overshadows Everything

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The triple tragedy in Japan overshadowed all other regional events in the first four months of 2011. The earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear crisis in March riveted the world and shone a spotlight on a country that had long been seen as an economic powerhouse. The vivid images of the disaster area were a reminder that even the most developed of countries is subject to the random course of nature and caused many to wonder how the events would affect Japan and the region. As its closest neighbors, the tragedy provided opportunities for both Koreas to offer condolences and aid to Japan and led to some hope that a stronger relationship could emerge between Japan and the Korean Peninsula. However, the tragedies did not remove the difficult issues between Japan and its neighbors or fundamentally alter longstanding trends in the region. In fact, quite soon after the earthquake these old issues began reappearing. It remains to be seen whether and to what extent the Fukushima earthquake marks a new era in Japan and what effect that might have on Japanese foreign relations, but certainly in the short term the Japanese will be focused more internally than externally as they concentrate on recovery and rebuilding.

Japan-South Korea

Bilateral relations between Japan and the ROK at the beginning of 2011 displayed a level of energy that typically characterizes the beginning of the year. In January, South Korean reports on regional and global trends for the coming year, on the whole, highlighted the good and downplayed the bad. The Sejong Institute's *Current Issue and Policy* (January, 2011) noted the common security environment shared by the ROK and Japan and the respective alliances with the US in forecasting a pragmatic and constructive year for Japan-South Korea relations. As a counterweight, the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security (IFANS) released a more somber brief on Jan. 7, incorporating such emotive buzzwords as Dokdo/Takeshima and textbooks. In practice, there were several cross-issue bilateral meetings in January, with Japanese Minister of State for National Policy Gamba Koichiro meeting ROK Foreign Minister Kim Sung-hwan to renew talks on a bilateral free trade agreement (FTA), and Japanese Foreign Minister Maehara Seiji meeting ROK Unification Minister Hyun In-taek to parse issues regarding North Korea. These bilateral meetings were also nested in trilateral arrangements: the third Japan-China-Korea Ministerial Conference on Culture took place in mid-January, while the foreign ministers gathered for the fifth tripartite meeting in mid-March.

Leveraging strengths – creative economic and social interaction

Economically and socially, Japanese-South Korean interactions and interconnections continued to expand quite rapidly and in ways thought unlikely even a decade earlier. For example,

functional economic cooperation between Japan and the ROK continued throughout the first four months of 2011. The South Korean IT company LG CNS announced in January that it will establish a joint-venture company with Japan's SBI group, an investment and financial group, in a deal that LG CNS hailed on its website as the "first domestic case of convergence and collaboration between the finance of Japan and the IT of Korea." With the capital reserves of the joint company at \$6.03 million (490 million yen/6.691 billion won), LG CNS and SBI Group will hold 51 percent and 49 percent of the stakes, respectively. The headquarters will be in Tokyo, running under a joint-management structure with each partner appointing a director for the joint presidency.

On Jan. 25, the same day as the announcement of the new joint venture, the Korea-Trade Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA) held its first investment seminar of the year in Tokyo. An official of KOTRA remarked that "this year's first investment seminar for foreign investors was arranged in Japan in a bid to take the 'new Korean wave' in Japan as leverage to attract investment and to relieve the anxiety of investors stemming from North Korea's recent bombing of Yeongpyeong Island."

The cities of Daegu and Kobe have continued collaboration on developing high-tech medical industry since signing a mutual cooperation agreement to jointly produce medical equipment back in July 2010. While Daegu has been designated as one of the two Korean med-tech hubs, Kobe is home to Japan's largest high-tech medical complex. In early January 2011, the Daegu Health and Medicine Association met with the Kobe High-Tech Medical Promotion Foundation RIKEN, a research center devoted to physical chemistry, to discuss a joint research project on new drug development. The official website of Daegu Metropolitan City highlighted the potential synergy between the ROK and Japan in exploring such natural ingredients as ginseng in developing drugs to treat dementia. Given that the UN Population Division (*The 2008 World Population Prospects*) predicts the population ratio of those over 60 years of age to be 40.8 percent in the ROK and 44.2 percent for Japan by 2050, drug development directly aimed at diseases associated with an aging society is a potential niche area for both countries. Concern with issues related to the aging population is palpable in both societies: on Feb. 14, the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) aired a special documentary that focused on whether the ROK will follow in the statistical footsteps of Japan, while Japan's Research Institute of Economy, Trade, and Industry (RIETI) published a paper in March linking the problem of Japan's aging society to the quality of its workforce (see Shinada Naoki, "Quality of Labor, Capital, and Productivity Growth in Japan: Effects of Employee Age, Seniority, and Capital Vintage," *RIETI Discussion Paper Series* 11-E-036, March 2011).

Interestingly, collaboration has transcended the traditional business sectors. For instance, *Joongang Ilbo* reported in mid-April that Korea's Hallym University had signed a mutual agreement with the Korean branch of Japanese Renesas Electronics – Japan's largest, and the world's third largest semiconductor company. The agreement is aimed at facilitating the growth of human resources in the field of electronics. To that end, Renesas Electronics will provide textbooks, guidelines, and human resources for the university to open a course on Micro Controller Units (MCU) in the fall of 2011.

On the inter-societal level, *Dong-a Ilbo* reported in late January that the car ferry route between Korea's Gwangyang port and Japan's Shimonoseki Port had been reopened after 73 years. The route had been in operation during the Japanese occupation from 1912 to 1938. An official of Gwangyang City said "the two ports are distribution hubs of agricultural and fishery products in the southwestern Japan, and gateways to tourism in Kyushu," and added "the opening of the route between Gwangyang and Japan is expected to bring about big change in human exchange and trade with Japan, which have been mainly concentrated in Busan."

Bilateral amity reached a new peak in March when the earthquake and tsunami devastated Northern Japan. Immediately, the Korean media highlighted the fact that the five-member team from the ROK's National Emergency Management Agency was the first overseas rescue team to reach Japan – a day after the tragedy struck. *Yomiuri Shimbun* also covered South Korea's efforts in Japan, along with the March 19 meeting of the foreign ministers from the ROK, Japan, and China to discuss disaster response and nuclear safety, drawing lessons from the catastrophe.

Specifically, some of the mobilization sources for donations for alleviating the disaster are worth mentioning. *Yonhap News* announced that the Korean company LG U+ (formerly known as LG Telecom) had agreed to collaborate with the widely-acclaimed Japanese animation artist and creator of *Dragon Ball*, Toriyama Akira, in producing digitally-animated cell phone wallpapers. LG U+ promised to donate all money raised from the initiative as well as offering matching grants. Also, the rate for international text messaging to Japan was reduced 50 percent until the end of March and the company joined forces with World Vision to raise donations through Korea's Twitter equivalent, 'Wagle.' *Yonhap News* also reported on the joint fundraising plan in Korea by 15 different groups focused on historical reconciliation, including the Institute for Research in Collaborationist Activities. According to *Kyodo News*, Korean actor Bae Yong-joon—affectionately known as 'Yonsama' in Japan—donated 1 billion won (\$890,000) to the Japanese government's fund for earthquake relief. These efforts highlighted the ingenuity of raising money by leveraging the strengths of high-tech countries like South Korea and Japan.

Close to being *aligned*, yet far from being *allied*

It did not take long for the momentum of the New Year to wear off. Beginning in January, the Korean press created a stir over a *Yomiuri Shimbun* article claiming that the two countries were preparing a joint declaration – with enhanced military cooperation as its focus – to be signed when ROK President Lee Myung-bak visits Tokyo during the first half of 2011. There were immediate reactions from three different groups: the leadership, the public, and the media. While the Japanese seemed enthusiastic, South Koreans appeared to be more reluctant.

The stance by the Japanese officials was firm. Takahashi Kosuke, a *Jane's Defense Weekly* correspondent, quoted then Japanese Foreign Minister Maehara Seiji as suggesting Seoul should take the lead in moving toward tighter bilateral security cooperation, adding, "it is important for Japan to see South Korea move of its own accord to deepen bilateral security ties." While not denying the *Yomiuri* report, an unnamed Japanese defense ministry official told *Asahi Shimbun* that even providing logistical support to the South Korean military during a crisis on the Korean Peninsula would be "an issue to work on over the next 10 years."

The Korean government made sure to suppress any agitation created by the *Yomiuri* article. *Maeil Kyungjae* quoted a Blue House official saying that “the 90 percent of those wanting the ROK-Japan joint military exercise is from the Japanese side, while we [Korea] only occupy the remaining 10 percent.” The same article quoted a ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND) official as stating that bilateral negotiations on a General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) and an Acquisition Crossing Supporting Agreement (ACSA) were just getting started, taking a low-key approach to the proceedings. *Chosun Ilbo* cited a very strongly worded statement from a Korean government official denying even the existence of negotiations, claiming that “enhanced bilateral military cooperation is merely an agenda on Japan’s wish list.”

The public in both countries diverged, but on a completely different level. The predominant sentiment in Korea ranged from negativity to caution. Civic groups held a rally at the ROK Defense Ministry in Yongsan, Seoul, not long after the confusion surrounding the bilateral military pact spread. According to *JoongAng Ilbo*, Kim Hwan-yeong, a representative of Peace Korea, a group of veterans, said: “Has there ever been once that the Japanese military regretted the atrocities that it committed during the 36 years of colonial rule? We have never felt that it is a different Japan from what it was.” Ultimately, the negativity or caution from the South Korean public hinged on three perceptual implications of what it meant to be engaged in such negotiations regarding state security: 1) confirmation of Japan’s past atrocities, 2) facilitation of future opportunities for Japan to ‘flex its militarism’ on the Korean Peninsula under pretexts of ‘contingencies,’ and 3) general worries over unnecessarily raising North Korea’s suspicions and irritating China. The last point, however, could cut both ways. Lee Myun-woo in a *Sejong Institute* commentary stated that the ‘ROK-Japan-US’ vs. ‘DPRK-China-Russia’ dichotomy is a result of North Korean provocations, which should not be aggravated by a military pact between the ROK and Japan. He encouraged the South Korean government to actively pursue the deal, claiming that South Korea needs to clearly distinguish between populism driven by emotions from practicality and stern leadership. A similar sentiment was evident in a small-n poll conducted online by *Chosun Ilbo*. Out of the 122 respondents, 75 percent supported the bilateral military pact, with 25 percent against it. The reason cited for the support was containment of North Korea and China.

Public sentiment in Japan was mixed. The interesting point was that none of the concerns or cynicism regarding the pact was directly aimed at South Korea. Comments attached to a Jan. 4 *Kyodo News* article on the subject ranged from “this is the beginning of an inevitable development expedited by North Korea’s actions and China’s behavior,” to “it is a very smart move on Japan’s part. A joint military pact with South Korea is far more realistic than continuing to be the pawn of USA,” to “now Japan and South Korea can integrate into one pawn of the USA. It’s easier for the US to manage.” The contention centered around the US, while South Korea was rarely mentioned.

The phrases used by the media were also quite telling. Korea’s *Maeil Shinmun* suggest that Koreans are not yet ready to surpass the stage of viewing Japan as ‘an accustomed/intimate enemy.’ *JoongAng Ilbo* opted for ‘a double-edged sword,’ referencing arguments about unresolved historical and territorial issues and the reinforcement of an oppositional ‘Cold War’ structure planting the US and China on different poles. The phrase of choice by *Chosun Ilbo* was ‘persistent courtship and wooing,’ as well as ‘lovecall’ to frame the debate in terms of Japan

being insistent on pushing through with the military pact. The Japanese media shied away from colorful metaphors. *Yomiuri Shimbun* did publish a favorable editorial on Jan. 12, urging both Seoul and Tokyo to proceed with negotiations and conclude the military pact.

Predictably, *Rodong Sinmun* labeled the January military talks between South Korea and Japan as a “new military conspiracy” and accused the ROK of “paving the way for Japan’s reinvasion,” and accused Japan of “working hard with bloodshot eyes to secure a legitimate pretext for its military overseas expansion.”

An April chill, the return of old issues

The goodwill displayed by South Korea toward Japan throughout March was hijacked by familiar problems. In the process, prospects for the military pact conspicuously fizzled out. At the end of March, Tokyo decided to approve middle school textbooks claiming sovereignty over the disputed islands of Dokdo/Takeshima. *Chosun Ilbo* noted that the number of textbooks claiming that Korea is illegally occupying the islets rose from one to four. In response, the chief of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MOFAT) Northeast Asia Bureau called in the Japanese embassy’s minister for general affairs to protest. Immediately thereafter, *Kyodo News* cited Japanese Foreign Minister Matsumoto Takeashi as telling the South Korean Ambassador to Japan Kwon Chul-hyun that Japan’s claims to the disputed islands remain unchanged.

This negative momentum was reinforced by the release of the diplomatic blue book by Tokyo reaffirming Dokdo/Takeshima as part of Japan’s territory, and a remark by Foreign Minister Matsumoto that, “Takeshima is Japan’s proper territory. If some foreign countries hit it with a missile, we will regard it as an attack on Japanese land.” Korean media capitalized on the moment and published a string of heated editorials in response. An April 9 *JoongAng Ilbo* op-ed said: “How the Japanese government find the time and energy to annoy its neighboring country through a territorial dispute and historical distortion while battling an earthquake and nuclear crisis is bewildering. The Japanese government has turned back the clock. It splashed cold water on Korea’s favorable sentiment toward a Japan in distress.” It was clear that at least a portion of the Korean society saw Japan’s stern attitude toward the Dokdo/Takeshima debate as ‘betrayal,’ given the neighborliness that was displayed just weeks prior in response to the earthquake.

Unfortunately, the discord regarding the islands and the textbooks spilled over into disaster relief. *DongA Ilbo* reported a visible drop in donations via the Audience Response Systems (ARS) disaster relief fund hotline, with some citizens actually taking advantage of the open channel to complain about why Koreans had to donate to the Japanese. In response to Seoul’s plans to build an oceanic science research station on the disputed islands, *Sankei Shimbun* carried a quote by Japan’s former Cabinet Secretary Hosoda Hiroyuki urging Tokyo to take “responsive measures,” to include declining Korean aid for Japanese earthquake victims and denying the Korean ambassador to Japan access to government officials. At least on the political level, the bilateral relations were once again enveloped in its usual spiral of indignation.

Then there is North Korea...

Pyongyang was relatively quiet during the first four months of 2011, with any ‘saber-rattling’ being verbal. *Yonhap News* announced that the Korean Workers’ Party newspaper, *Rodong*

Shinmun, officially launched its own website www.rodong.rep.kp on Feb. 16, just in time for the 69th birthday of leader Kim Jong Il. The newspaper has consistently published vitriolic editorials directly aimed at Japan: a Feb. 20 article described Japan's resistance to rectify history as 'despicable,' 'heinous,' and 'wicked,' while a Feb. 24 article equated Japan's past historical act as a 'sin.' These followed a Feb. 13 article that attacked Japan's domestic situation, stating that Japan's police force was corrupt, committed criminal acts, and behaved in a deplorable manner. As news of the disaster in Japan hit the media, the *Rodong Shinmun* website temporarily discontinued its scathing remarks. Reports on the developments concerning the radiation leak at the Fukushima power plant became the substitute.

Meanwhile, the *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)* announced that North Korea had donated \$100,000 for relief efforts in Japan, while Kim Jong Il separately sent \$500,000 to aid the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan on the occasion of the 99th birthday of President Kim Il Sung. Despite the donation, Japanese media hinted at North Korea's goal of raising hard currency by applying to the UN for emission credits on their three hydropower plants currently under construction. *Asahi Shimbun* reported that with carbon dioxide emissions trading for roughly \$28 per ton, Pyongyang could stand to gain millions of dollars in income.

The coming months

At present, it appears that the middle of 2011 should be relatively quiet. Japan continues to struggle with the nuclear disaster in Fukushima and its economy will suffer in the aftermath of the earthquake. Although the history issue often intrudes, other economic and social relations continue to increase the density of ties between South Korea and Japan. While North Korea has been relatively quiet for the past months, the possibility of another North Korean provocation cannot be ruled out. With the presidential election in South Korea over a year in the future, and Japanese Prime Minister Kan apparently in command, there appears to be no great change or bold initiative in either of their foreign policies on the horizon.

Chronology of Japan-Korea Relations January – April 2011

Jan. 4, 2011: *Chosun Ilbo* refutes a *Yomiuri Shimbun* article claiming that Korea and Japan are in negotiations to conclude a bilateral military pact. The Korean media outlet cites a Korean government official who claims that "the Japanese side is unilaterally spilling a story to the media that has not even been consulted with the Korean side."

Jan. 4, 2011: In a press conference, Japanese Foreign Minister Maehara Seiji expresses his intent to create an environment to facilitate negotiations with North Korea in the New Year.

Jan. 7, 2011: Japan's Minister of the State for National Policy Gemba Koichiro meets South Korean Foreign Minister Kim Sung-hwan to renew talks on a free trade agreement (FTA).

Jan. 10, 2011: Japanese Defense Minister Kitazawa Toshimi and South Korean counterpart Kim Kwan-jin meet to discuss closer bilateral military cooperation. Civic groups protest at the ROK Defense Ministry in Seoul against the prospective bilateral military pact.

Jan. 14, 2011: The captain of a South Korean fishing boat is released by Japan's Coast Guard. According to *Yonhap News*, the captain was released after he admitted to trespassing in Japan's exclusive economic zone. According to Coast Guard officials, he was released after the South Korean Embassy in Tokyo submitted a written guarantee to pay a cash bond of 250,000 yen.

Jan. 14-15, 2011: Foreign Minister Maehara visits Seoul and meets Foreign Minister Kim Sung-hwan, Unification Minister Hyun In-taek, and President Lee Myung-bak.

Jan. 18-20, 2011: Third Japan-China-Korea Ministerial Conference on Culture is held in Nara, Japan. Japan's Commissioner of Cultural Affairs Kondo Seiichi, China's Minister of Culture Cai Wu, and South Korea's Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism Yu In-chon participate.

Jan. 23, 2011: *Japan Today* highlights the biography of the new South Korean consul general-elect in Hiroshima: a son of a man who experienced the 1945 atomic bombing of the city and also took charge in requesting compensation for the South Korean victims.

Jan. 25, 2011: LG CNS announces the establishment of a joint venture with SBI Group of Japan.

Feb. 2, 2011: *Yomiuri Shimbun* reports that Japanese chipmaker Elpida Memory Inc. has reached an agreement on production with a Taiwan manufacturer, thus, representing a "major step toward a Japan-Taiwan alliance to vie with the South Korean giants who dominate the field."

Feb. 9, 2011: The Korean mobile network operator SK Telecom and its Japanese near-field communication (NFC) partners KDDI and Softbank Mobile announce a plan to begin internal testing of cross-border NFC services.

Feb. 11, 2011: *Donga Ilbo* quotes Japanese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Sato Satoru as claiming that South Korea or China must gain prior authorization from Japan to participate in development projects with Russia in the Kuril Islands.

Feb. 13, 2011: Former Japanese Justice Minister Seikan Suguira and former Korean Justice Minister Kim Sung-ho visit the House of Sharing in Gwangju to pay respects to the comfort women who were forced into sexual slavery during the Japanese colonial rule.

Feb 16, 2011: Foreign Minister Kim Sung-hwan visits Japan for the first time since his appointment in October of 2010. He meets Foreign Minister Maehara, Prime Minister Kan Naoto, and several others, including Sengoku Yoshito, acting president of the Democratic Party, and Tanigaki Sadakazu, president of the Liberal Democratic Party.

March 7-9, 2011: Sugiyama Shinsuke, director general of the Japanese Foreign Ministry's Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau and Japan's chief envoy for the Six-Party Talks, visits Seoul and meets Foreign Ministry officials including his Six-Party Talks counterpart, Wi Sung-lak.

March 11, 2011: An earthquake measuring 9.0 on the Richter scale hits the Tohoku region of Japan causing a massive tsunami and resulting in large-scale death and destruction.

March 19, 2011: Japanese Foreign Minister Matsumoto Takeaki, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, and ROK Foreign Affairs and Trade Minister Kim Sung-hwan agree to enhance trilateral cooperation to better respond to major disasters and ensure the safety of atomic power.

March 30, 2011: Japan's Education Ministry approves several junior high school textbooks that describe Dokdo/Takeshima as part of Japanese territory.

April 12, 2011: *Yonhap News* reports on a two-day meeting of Japanese and South Korean nuclear safety experts after South Korea expressed concerns over the release of more than 11,000 tons of water contaminated with radiation that was used to cool reactors at Fukushima.

April 14, 2011: *Sankei Shimbun* reports that a committee in Japan's Liberal Democratic Party has asked the Japanese government to establish a "Takeshima Day," in an effort to assert the country's claim to the territory.

April 27, 2011: Japanese parliamentary panel endorses a treaty to transfer to South Korea historical documents that were brought to Japan during its 1910-1945 colonial rule of the Korean Peninsula, paving the way for its ratification by the Diet.