

Japan-Korea Relations: The Sweet, the Sour, and the Bittersweet

by Victor D. Cha
D.S. Song-Korea Foundation Chair,
Director, American Alliances in Asia Project, Georgetown University

Do crises bring allies together or drive them apart? The nuclear weapons “crisis” with North Korea put this question to the test this past quarter. Trilateral coordination among Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo operated in overdrive as the three allies reacted to the revelations of North Korean nuclear intransigence, producing mixed results. On the bilateral fronts, Japan-DPRK relations soured this quarter about as much as they had sweetened with the Koizumi summit in Pyongyang in September, over the very same issue: abductions. Meanwhile, the Japanese wait nervously for the incoming Roh Moo-hyun government, virtually ignorant of the South Korean president-elect’s views on Seoul-Tokyo relations.

Japan-DPRK relations: the Saga of the Abductees

Contrary to what one might expect, there were other notable events in Japan-Korea relations outside of the crisis over North Korea’s nuclear weapons programs. Following Kim Jong-il’s bombshell admission during his summit with Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro in September of North Korean responsibility for the kidnapping of 13 Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s, the two governments supposedly worked out an arrangement in which five abductees were finally allowed to return to Japan for a brief visit. Their return to Japan on Oct. 15, and their stories were the obsession of the Japanese media and people following their arrival and the tearful reunions with long-lost relatives and friends.

These well-publicized homecomings rapidly turned into a bittersweet experience for both people and governments involved, however. Things looked like they were moving along smoothly until some of the abductees formally requested permission to resettle in Japan. Chimura Yasushi, who was abducted along with Hamamoto Fukie by DPRK spies 24 years ago, expressed their intention in a letter to Koizumi. Moreover in a symbolic act, the abductees added insult to injury by removing their DPRK lapel pins. DPRK authorities responded by filing strong protests claiming that the abductees were being detained in Japan against their will.

Thus a new dispute over the abductees has emerged from earlier attempts by Pyongyang and Tokyo to put the issue to bed. The highly emotional nature of this issue for the

Japanese public is certain to present a continual obstacle to normalization talks between the two countries. These talks ground to a halt in October and November as North Korea threatened to end its missile testing moratorium if Japan were not more flexible in its attitudes toward talks.

No one wins from the continuing abductee problem in bilateral relations, however. Perhaps the biggest losers are the abductees themselves as all have left children in North Korea (as a condition for their travel to Japan). Japan has demanded that these children be sent to accompany their parents, but Pyongyang has predictably refused this request. Ralph Cossa best summed up this dilemma in a Nov. 22 *PacNet* article: "one can only hope that Tokyo and Pyongyang can put politics aside and find a compromise, such as allowing the families to reunite on neutral territory so that the Japanese abductees can, for the first time in decades, truly exercise free choice in determining their fates."

'TCOG plus'

The quarter saw frenetic activity as Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington responded to the revelations in October of a second covert North Korean drive to acquire nuclear weapons through uranium-enrichment technology. In the first direct meetings between the Bush administration and North Korea, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James Kelly stated the U.S. desire to seek an improvement of relations and tension reduction on the Peninsula, but that such an agenda was very difficult to discuss given recently acquired evidence of a covert nuclear program in violation of the 1994 Agreed Framework. The North Koreans denied such accusations initially, but on the second day of meetings boldly admitted to such violations, justifying their activities as a response to President Bush's designation of North Korea as part of the "axis of evil" (despite the fact that the program started before the Bush administration came into office). In subsequent actions at the end of December, the North Koreans then unsealed the reactor facilities at Yongbyon frozen under the 1994 agreement, dismantled monitoring cameras, and then expelled the International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors who were tasked with monitoring on the ground compliance with the agreement.

Trilateral activity during the quarter largely focused on reconciling and uniting what appeared to be disparate positions on how to respond to this rash of North Korean provocations. Despite complete consensus that a military solution to the problem was not desirable, the South Korean, U.S., and Japanese governments appeared to differ on the nature and type of dialogue that should take place in order to bring the North Koreans back into compliance. For the Bush administration, the basic principle was the refusal to engage in any dialogue or offer of *quid pro quos* for the North to roll back their bad behavior. At the start of the new year, the administration appeared to show some flexibility, noting a willingness to talk directly with the North Koreans on the types of activities that need to be undertaken to avert a crisis, but the basic principle of not succumbing to Pyongyang's nuclear blackmail remained. For the South Korean and Japanese governments, such "blackmail" was also unacceptable, but short of this

extreme, there was a strong belief in Seoul and Tokyo that negotiations of some form with the North were necessary to avoid escalation of the crisis.

The specifics of these respective positions were discussed at various sets of trilateral meetings during the quarter. On the sidelines of the APEC meetings in Mexico at the end of October, the three leaders issued a joint statement calling for the North to come back into compliance with its nuclear weapons obligations. At the November Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) meetings in Tokyo, the key agenda item was whether to suspend heavy fuel oil shipments to North Korea as promised under the 1994 Agreed Framework. Both Seoul and Tokyo at the time implored the U.S. to agree to continue shipments (there was a November monthly shipment of fuel oil already in transit, and the last scheduled delivery for 2002 in December). And in the end, the three allies reached a compromise in which the November shipment was not turned back, but the suspension would be effective – as announced by the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) later that week – from December.

Though TCOG remained the mainstay, there was a rash of other diplomatic discussions over the North Korean nuclear crisis initiated by Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington. In what might be described as “TCOG-plus,” the three allies proactively sought consultations with China, Russia, and each other during the quarter. Significant among these was Seoul’s efforts in late December (and early January) to seek Beijing’s advice as the Kim Dae-jung government attempted to engineer a proposal to mediate the crisis between Washington and Pyongyang. Japan also sought Russia’s help in conveying to the North Koreans the need to eliminate their nuclear weapons programs during meetings between Foreign Ministers Igor Ivanov and Kawaguchi Yoriko. Also important were the U.S.-Japan bilateral meetings, the Security Consultative Committee in Washington in December – involving Foreign Minister Kawaguchi, Defense Agency Director General Ishiba Shigeru, Secretary of State Colin Powell, and Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz – in which Japan pledged allegiance to the U.S. position that the North must come clean on its nuclear weapons activities. Such diplomatic efforts are no doubt a function of anxieties held in all capitals in Asia about the direction of the standoff with North Korea.

On a more optimistic note, the frenetic diplomatic activity also represents an incipient multilateralism in the region that has arguably been created since the first North Korean nuclear crisis in 1994. This early crisis eventually gave way to the only “minilateral” security institutions in Asia i.e., TCOG and KEDO. These institutions were distinct because in contrast to the multilateralism often trumpeted in Southeast Asia, KEDO dealt directly with a real security issue (nuclear proliferation in North Korea); required the active participation of several key agents (including the United States, South Korea, Japan, and the European Union); and involved real investments of time and money (billions of dollars by the U.S., Japan, and South Korea). In this sense, it constituted more than a “talk shop.” Arguably, the spate of activity in the past quarter could constitute the beginning of something akin to “TCOG-plus” as the region responds to developments on the Peninsula.

Seoul-Tokyo Relations: Roh Who?

For Seoul-Tokyo relations, the big question raised this quarter is the future of Japan-ROK relations with the election of political maverick Roh Moo-hyun. The South Korean president-elect, in post-election press statements, made very clear his desire to work with the allies in resolving the nuclear problem with North Korea. The day after the election, Roh said that he envisioned under his presidency no major changes in the five decade-old alliance relationship with the United States and its security framework in East Asia. This presumably included Japan. But as had been made clear during the election campaign profiles of Roh, foreign policy is not his docket. Indeed, if the concern during the campaign raised by political pundits was that Roh's views on the alliance relationship with the United States were translucent—varying between his earlier activist streak strongly opposing the U.S., and his “re-thought,” moderated position supporting the alliance—his views on Japan were downright opaque. Public discussion on the implications of the ROK presidential election for bilateral relations with Japan really did not advance beyond vague statements about joint efforts and with the United States to continue some aspects of engagement with North Korea and resolving the nuclear problem peacefully.

But there must clearly be some apprehension in the halls of Japan's Foreign Ministry about where Roh will take Seoul-Tokyo relations. In the early part of Kim Dae-jung's administration, earnest and effective efforts were made to set bilateral relations on a new footing, and in spite of a downturn in relations over textbook issues in 2000-2001, progress had been made that culminated with the smashing success of the joint hosting of the World Cup. Whether the new untested South Korean leader has either the capacity or will to follow this path remains to be seen. Roh's background, his political constituency, and his values suggest potentially a less sympathetic view toward Japan, informed by a desire to shed economic dependence on the former colonizer. Moreover, as Chief Cabinet Secretary Fukuda Yasuo stated upon Roh's electoral victory, though this may have been a great day for Korean democracy, there was no getting around the fact that this man was an unknown quantity with few personal or political links to Japan.

In spite of these concerns, there are reasons not to be entirely pessimistic. Roh's lukewarm pronouncements on Japan are not nearly as important in this regard as the fact that he will soon take the reins of power in arguably the most vibrant democracy in Asia. And in such a democracy, the new South Korean leader must represent the views of the entire country rather than a narrow constituency. Movement to the political center, therefore, is likely and this will benefit relations with Japan. Recent history offers a lesson in this regard. Kim Dae-jung arguably heralded from a similar political constituency and value system as that of Roh, and Kim's presidency will be remembered as one that worked extremely hard to advance Japan-ROK relations, arguably rivaled only by Park Chung-hee (even Kim's harshest critics will grudgingly grant this). Kim's protege would have to undergo a relatively deeper transformation (and yes, it would help if he had spent as much time in Japan as Kim did), but the geostrategics of the East Asian region in which Korea and Japan sit as the prominent two technologically advanced, liberal-democratic, market-oriented peoples offers a powerful, time-tested, and almost

indisputable logic to the bilateral relationship and the trilateral framework with the United States.

Chronology of Japan-Korea Relations¹

October-December 2002

Oct. 1, 2002: Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly coordinates policy with Seoul and Tokyo in advance of leading a U.S. delegation to North Korea.

Oct. 1, 2002: Japan completes fact-finding mission to North Korea regarding abduction cases involving Japanese citizens by the DPRK.

Oct. 2, 2002: Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro said Tokyo would resume contact with DPRK regarding the issue of normalizing ties.

Oct. 4, 2002: Authorities conclude that the DPRK ship sunk and then salvaged by the Japan Coast Guard was indeed a spy boat.

Oct. 8, 2002: Japan's National Police Agency officially includes four more victims on the list of Japanese citizens abducted by the DPRK.

Oct. 11, 2002: Japanese and ROK civic groups dedicated to rescuing those kidnapped by the DPRK hold a joint press conference in Seoul.

Oct. 14, 2002: PM Koizumi discloses that DPRK leader Kim Jong-il gave his word during their summit in September that he would not divert economic assistance from abroad for military purposes.

Oct. 15, 2002: Five Japanese kidnapped by North Korea in 1978 arrive in Tokyo.

Oct. 16, 2002: U.S. discloses that DPRK admitted to having a new nuclear weapons program.

Oct. 22, 2002: Japan announces that it would stop financing two nuclear reactors in the DPRK and suspend talks on normalizing relations if there is no progress on ending the DPRK's nuclear weapons program.

Oct. 26, 2002: President Bush, Prime Minister Koizumi and ROK President Kim Dae-jung issue a trilateral summit statement during the APEC meetings in Mexico affirming their commitment to a peaceful Korean Peninsula that is free of nuclear weapons and urging the DPRK to give up its nuclear weapons program.

¹ Compiled with research assistance from Hyunsun Seo.

Oct. 27, 2002: Japan denies three North Korean state officials' entry.

Oct. 29-30, 2002: DPRK and Japan hold talks to normalize relations in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. DPRK rejects Japanese efforts to discuss the North's nuclear weapons development program.

Nov. 1, 2002: Japanese FM Kawaguchi Yoriko asserts the absence of any preconditions in the next round of normalization talks with the DPRK.

Nov. 5, 2002: PM Koizumi holds consultations on North Korean nuclear revelations with Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji and ROK Premier Kim Suk-soo during ASEAN Plus Three meetings in Cambodia.

Nov. 5, 2002: North Korea threatens to end missile testing moratorium if Japan does not show more flexibility on the abductions issue and nuclear issue.

Nov. 6, 2002: A Japanese activist, deported from the PRC for allegedly helping North Korean defectors, claims he was physically abused during his week-long detention by PRC authorities.

Nov. 8, 2002: DPRK accuses Japan of sabotaging efforts to establish diplomatic ties by demanding the resolution of the abduction issue and the nuclear weapons program.

Nov. 9, 2002: Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) meeting in Tokyo. Lee Tae-sik, ROK deputy foreign minister, Assistant Secretary Kelly and Tanaka Hitoshi, the head of the Asian bureau at Japan's Foreign Ministry, discuss halting heavy fuel oil shipments to the DPRK.

Nov. 14, 2002: Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) announces decision to suspend heavy fuel oil shipments to North Korea.

Nov. 18, 2002: The DPRK announces that it is contemplating the end of its missile testing moratorium in reaction to Japanese efforts to develop a missile defense shield with the U.S.

Nov. 19, 2002: Japanese media reports that Tokyo is investigating the possibility that up to 80 more Japanese citizens could have been abducted to the DPRK.

Nov. 21, 2002: Japan announces plans to launch the country's first spy satellites by the end of March to monitor DPRK military moves.

Nov. 22, 2002: The DPRK bars a U.S.-led consortium from inspecting how the DPRK is using deliveries of fuel oil.

Nov. 23-24, 2002: Japanese and DPRK officials meet for unofficial talks but fail to agree on how to proceed with negotiations to normalize relations.

Nov. 26, 2002: FM Kawaguchi said Japan would not give up on attempts to normalize relations with the DPRK even though deep differences exist but did not anticipate resumption of normalization talks before the end of the year.

Nov. 27, 2002: The DPRK ship salvaged by the Japanese Coast Guard was discovered to have been involved in illicit criminal activities in Japan.

Nov. 30, 2002: FM Kawaguchi acknowledges that Japan is not likely to provide food aid to North Korea this year.

Dec. 2, 2002: U.S. Ambassador to Japan Howard Baker states that the three allies remain united in their determination to end the North Korean nuclear dispute through diplomacy.

Dec. 2, 2002: Official diplomatic documents to validate a bilateral investment treaty (BIT) between the ROK and Japan are exchanged and the agreement is scheduled to take effect from 2003.

Dec. 4, 2002: DPRK rejects a call by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) for the DPRK to abandon its nuclear weapons program and allow foreign inspections

Dec. 5, 2002: Foreign ministers of Japan and China agree to work together to resolve North Korea's nuclear issue in a peaceful manner.

Dec. 6, 2002: The UN Human Rights Committee decides to resume investigation of missing Japanese citizens abducted to the DPRK.

Dec. 11, 2002: FM Kawaguchi expresses concern over reports of a North Korean freighter found carrying missiles in the Arabian Sea.

Dec. 14, 2002: In a telephone conversation, PM Koizumi and President Kim express grave concern jointly at North Korea's unsealing of the Yongbyon reactors and the obstruction of IAEA monitoring cameras in violation of the 1994 Agreed Framework.

Dec. 16, 2002: U.S.-Japan's "2+2 ministerial" meetings in Washington attended by Secretary of State Powell, Deputy Secretary of Defense Wolfowitz, Japanese FM Kawaguchi, and the Japanese Defense Agency's Director General Ishiba, call on North Korea to come back into compliance with nonproliferation agreements.

Dec. 17, 2002: The five Japanese abductees reconvene as a group in Niigata for the first time since their homecoming in October to discuss their return to North Korea.

Dec. 17, 2002: The Japanese government decides to pay compensation to atomic bomb victims living outside the country, including Koreans.

Dec. 19, 2002: Two of the abductees (Chimura Yasushi and Hamamoto Fukie) formally announce that the five abductees wish to remain in Japan rather than return to North Korea.

Dec. 19, 2002: *Mainichi Shimbun* reports that documents obtained by nongovernmental organization groups in Japan describe internal criticism in the DPRK with regard to efforts at economic reform and the lifting of price controls in July.

Dec. 20, 2002: PM Koizumi congratulates ROK President-elect Roh Moo-hyun for his electoral victory. Roh gives post-election press statements about the need to closely coordinate with Japan and the US in seeking a peaceful solution to the nuclear stalemate with North Korea.

Dec. 29, 2002: The Japanese government says that it is considering unilateral economic sanctions against North Korea to stop its nuclear weapons program.