

Japan-Korea Relations: Ending 2000 with a Whimper, Not a Bang

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Ever bang your head against a brick wall countless times? This must be how Japanese negotiators feel after another quarter of normalization talks with North Korea. Despite Tokyo's earnest efforts, a breakthrough in deadlocked talks was not achievable. While hope springs eternal that the new year may bring progress, the future path is far from clear, given a variety of factors in Tokyo, Seoul, and Washington that may suggest a new algorithm in bilateral relations with Pyongyang. Regarding Seoul-Tokyo relations, the quarter was a fairly quiet one. Trilateral coordination with the U.S. on North Korea continued functioning in the form of Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG). Of most interest was the growth of Japan-South Korea-China links, suggesting initial steps toward greater institutionalization of the region.

Japan-DPRK Normalization: Ending the Year with a Whimper

The big story for the quarter was Japan-DPRK normalization talks. As discussed in previous columns, this was certain to be a protracted and difficult set of negotiations, but Tokyo appeared to have come to the table this past quarter with the chips and the determination to achieve a breakthrough. Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro (at the advice of Kim Dae-jung) sent a personal letter to DPRK leader Kim Jong-il requesting summit talks (revealed October 6). In advance of late October normalization talks, Tokyo announced a contribution of 500,000 tons of rice to the North (a five-fold increase over past contributions). Having greased the wheels, Japanese negotiators then put forth the proposal for a purported \$9 billion (60 percent in grant aid and 40 percent in loans) as a *quid pro quo* for North Korean moderation of the missile threat and satisfactory resolution of the alleged abduction of Japanese nationals, which would lay the groundwork for a move to political normalization of relations. Despite Japanese hopes of ending the year 2000 with a bang (read: ANY progress), Pyongyang's continued intransigence dashed all such aspirations. The disappointment among Japanese officials at this outcome was palpable and manifest in very frank public statements that talks would not restart until sometime in 2001 in part because as one official put it, "...we have exhausted what we have in our pockets."

At issue was Japan's proposal of a normalization settlement formula similar to the 1965

pact with South Korea, which offered economic aid and loans in lieu of explicitly terming it colonial compensation. While Japanese negotiators did not expect their counterparts to outright accept this idea, there were indications based on the last round of negotiations (see Victor Cha, “What’s Behind the Smile?” *Comparative Connections* Vol. 2 No. 3) that Pyongyang would show a “positive attitude.” Instead, North Korea responded that such attempts to side-step an admission of colonial repentance were logically inconsistent with the notion of opening a new era of cooperation (which in no uncertain terms also criticized the South for “selling out” in its 1965 settlement). The quarter ended with a mission to Pyongyang in December by former Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi to seek some avenue of progress.

Trilateral Coordination

Japan-ROK-U.S. trilateral policy coordination continued during the quarter. The primary topic of discussion was the historic meeting between DPRK leader Kim Jong-il and U.S. Secretary of State Albright in Pyongyang. All sides made the requisite statements about maintaining close ties and synchronizing policies vis-à-vis the North, yet the subtext emerging from the meetings was making certain everyone was on the same page regarding North Korean missiles.

As discussed last quarter, there are differences of opinion with regard to what should be prioritized in U.S.-DPRK missile talks. Quite simply, each party’s primary concern is the North Korean program most immediately threatening to it. Hence, for the U.S., the primary concern is the North’s long-range missile program (Taepo-dong); for South Korea, it is heavy artillery along the DMZ; and for Japan, it is the short- and medium-range missiles (especially the No-dong deployments). In an ideal world, a deal could be made with the North Koreans that at once would address all of these concerns, but in the real world, Pyongyang’s negotiating strategy would be to maximize leverage and benefits by negotiating each of these separately.

Japan’s nightmare scenario is a situation in which the U.S. and DPRK reach an agreement on the long-range program while leaving the No-dong program intact. These concerns were made clear in Tokyo’s public statements in the Japanese press after the TCOG meetings in October. In support of the trilateral coordination process, Secretary Albright explicitly stated that her discussions with Kim Jong-il dealt with “all kinds of missiles.” Moreover, the unconsummated visit by Clinton to Pyongyang could be interpreted as a blessing in disguise for Tokyo if the domain of a framework deal on DPRK missiles was not perceived by the U.S. to be expansive enough. The problem of coordinating priorities on the DPRK missile issue will continue to present challenges for Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul.

Growing Institutionalization

One of the more interesting trends emerging from the quarter was the efforts by Japan and South Korea to engage China in trilateral dialogue. This was evident at the transnational level in an agreement among the national law enforcement agencies of the three countries (with Russia) to cooperate with regard to combating transnational crime. Police officials of the four countries agreed to devise collaborative information-sharing measures to deal in particular with drug-trafficking and cyber crime in the region. They also agreed to open police officer exchange programs and regular transnational seminars on administrative reform.

Perhaps more important, at the international level, a five-point agreement was reached by Premiers Mori and Zhu Rongji and President Kim Dae-jung in November on enhancing trilateral cooperation on a variety of issues. Released in the form of a joint statement during the ASEAN Plus Three meetings in Singapore (November 24-25), the three leaders agreed to seek ways of enhancing economic cooperation (including possibly Kim's proposal for a hedge fund monitoring mechanism for speculative currency movements), and to establish working-level government groups (i.e., bureau chief-level) to promote cooperation in information technology. They also agreed to promote environmental cooperation (including the regular sharing of information and annual deliberations on joint projects to manage pressing environmental problems) and to designating 2002 the "Year of Peoples' Exchanges" involving exchange programs for next-generation leaders and other cultural and personnel exchanges.

These may seem like minor accomplishments, but they are important for two reasons. First, these efforts at establishing channels of cooperation on such "low politics" issues (many in the "new post-Cold War" security school would disagree with such terminology) complement nicely the relatively informal but nevertheless important dialogue among the three parties that takes place on the "high politics" issue of engagement with North Korea. Second, the intentions behind these efforts are not ad hoc but institutionalized forms of cooperation. The five-point agreement explicitly calls for a trilateral summit annually (Japan in 2001 and China in 2002). Why is this important? The common observation so often heard about security in Northeast Asia is the absence of NATO- or CSCE-like institutions that can facilitate the transparency, confidence-building, and trust necessary to overcome historical hatreds and power rivalries that threaten the region's stability. The five-point agreement on environmental, economic, cultural, and information technology (IT) cooperation, and transnational efforts at combating crime and piracy offer modest but useful building blocks for greater institutionalization of the region. Ultimately, these institutions create practices of consultation (or "habit dialogue" as the Canadians like to call it) and "mutual-help" (rather than self-help) mentalities both on low and high politics issues that bode well for the management of regional security. It is still very early in the process and, from Seoul and Tokyo's perspective, this institutionalization does not replace traditional bilateralism with the United States (nor should it be seen as such), but it is a trend worth watching.

Outlook

Regarding Japan-DPRK normalization, visits by Japanese companies to the Rajin area scheduled in early January may result in some infrastructure projects that could help facilitate forward movement in relations (the group's visit is at the request of the DPRK Committee for Promotion of External Trade). But the basic problem with regard to the future is that continuation on the current path is not likely. In Japan, Tokyo may have taken its best shot at reaching a breakthrough as a weak Mori government, surviving a no-confidence vote in late November, now faces mounting criticism from the domestic opposition at its overly conciliatory efforts to woo Pyongyang. In Seoul, what is certain to be more difficult economic times in the new year will increasingly make it difficult for Kim Dae-jung to continue financing the Sunshine Policy with the North off the backs of South Korean taxpayers. And in the U.S., Clinton's non-visit and the transition to a new Bush administration mean that Washington will, at best, reluctantly continue pursuing engagement with the North.

If one believes that the North pursues only one bilateral channel at a time (to maximize leverage by playing the others off the chosen channel), then this confluence of factors suggests a new algorithm in 2001. While 2000 saw activity on the North-South and U.S.-North Korean channels with the Japanese nervously trying to keep pace, lack of movement on the Seoul and Washington channels in early 2001 may incline Pyongyang to focus more on Tokyo. At the same time, a Mori government (if it is still around) will need to appease a domestic opposition impatient with "soft policies" toward the North. Whether this new algorithm creates opportunities for progress in Japan-DPRK relations is, frankly, anyone's guess.

Chronology of Japan-Korea Relations October-December 2000

Oct. 2, 2000: Japan and ROK participate, along with the U.S. and Singapore, in 13-day Pacific Reach combined submarine exercise.

Oct. 5, 2000: ROK's trade deficit with Japan reaches \$8.14 billion, a 56.7% increase from the previous year, due to the lifting of restrictions on selected Japanese goods

Oct. 6, 2000: In a four-nation agreement, top police officials from ROK, Japan, China, and Russia agree to cooperate in drug investigations and in combating international crimes.

Oct. 7, 2000: At the three-day Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) meeting held in Washington, D.C., the ROK, the U.S., and Japan discuss the outcome of their contacts with DPRK.

Oct. 17, 2000: The Japanese government admits that Prime Minister Mori sent a secret, personal letter to Kim Jong-il asking for summit talks (sent September 30).

Oct. 20, 2000: ROK Ministry of Commerce considers forming a consortium of domestic and foreign companies to develop oil fields near Tokto (Takeshima).

Oct. 25, 2000: ROK and Japan Foreign Ministers meet with Secretary Albright in Seoul following her Pyongyang trip.

Oct. 26, 2000: Japanese newspaper *Tokyo Shinbun* reports on the Japanese government's intention to give \$9 billion (60% donations, 40% loans) in economic aid to DPRK.

Oct. 26, 2000: DPRK demands apology from Prime Minister Mori for claiming Japanese sovereignty over ROK-held Tokto island in a Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) interview that took place prior to last month's Japan-ROK summit talks.

Oct. 27-28, 2000: The U.S., Japan, and ROK stress trilateral cooperation for peace on the Korean Peninsula during TCOG meeting in Japan.

Oct. 31, 2000: DPRK chief negotiator Jong Tae-hwa and Japan's Takano Kojiro fail to resolve the issue of Japanese colonial reparations or to reconcile the abduction issue during Japan-DPRK normalization talks in Beijing.

Nov. 1, 2000: President Kim Dae-jung states that he expects "positive changes" in North Korea-Japan relations.

Nov. 3, 2000: Newly appointed Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Fukuda Yasuo announces that each Japanese cabinet minister will make a "voluntary based" 100,000 yen contribution to a semipublic fund to compensate wartime comfort women.

Nov. 9, 2000: *Asahi Shimbun* reports disagreement within Japan's ruling and opposition parties to the government's handling of Japan-DPRK normalization talks.

Nov. 16, 2000: Leaders of the U.S., Russia, China, and Japan support President Kim's request to give DPRK a limited role in APEC Leaders' Meeting.

Nov. 17, 2000: Meeting on the sidelines of the APEC Leaders' Meeting in Brunei, Prime Minister Mori, President Kim, and President Clinton pledge to establish closer ties to coordinate a unified policy toward DPRK.

Nov. 18, 2000: A second delegation of 104 Chongryon members visits Seoul for family reunions.

Nov. 21, 2000: Thomas Foley, U.S. Ambassador to Japan, states that any normalization agreement between DPRK and Japan will entail Japan paying "significant reparations" to DPRK.

Nov. 25, 2000: At a breakfast meeting during the ASEAN Plus Three summit, China, Japan, and South Korea reach a five-point agreement on economic, environmental, and information technology cooperation.

Nov. 27, 2000: Uncertainty over negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang on DPRK's missile development and reshuffle of Prime Minister Mori's cabinet lead Japan to forego diplomatic normalization talks with DPRK. Japan aims to resume talks in early 2001.

Nov. 29, 2000: ROK lawmakers from the ruling and opposition party assert that the 1965 treaty between ROK and Japan purposely overlooked the seriousness of Japan's WWII crimes, and insist that Japan apologize for its period of colonial rule and provide compensation before it can normalize ties with DPRK.

Dec. 1, 2000: A delegation from the DPRK Association of External Culture Liaison and a Japanese delegation led by former Japanese Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi meet in Pyongyang.

Dec. 1, 2000: DPRK reveals that it refused Japan's proposal to normalize relations based on the ROK-Japan agreement of 1965, in which Tokyo gave "aid/donations" and "loans" as a means of sidestepping the difficult issue of colonial compensation.

Dec. 4, 2000: Seoul expresses regret at the Japanese Diet's failure to pass a bill granting ethnic Korean residents in Japan the right to vote in local elections.

Dec. 5, 2000: In a meeting with Chairman of the Standing Committee of the DPRK Supreme People's Assembly, former Japanese Prime Minister Murayama, Chairman of the National Association of Promoting Japan-DPRK Diplomatic Relations, says that Japan's normalization of relations with DPRK should be guided by the principle of self-reliance.

Dec. 15, 2000: Japanese Police Public Security Section confiscated a DPRK agent guidebook from DPRK trading company president, Kang Sung-hui, who had already been arrested for fraud in Japan.

Dec. 25, 2000: To strengthen South Korea's claim over Tokto, a department to seek exclusive Korean control of the islets will be set up in the Ullung County office.

December 27, 2000: ROK's steel trade deficit with Japan reaches \$1.38 billion in the January-November period, up 34% from last year.

Dec. 27, 2000: For the first time in five years, Japan surpasses the U.S. as the largest exporter to ROK. Japan's exports are valued at \$21.2 billion.

* compiled with the assistance of Yvonne So.

