

Japan-Korea Relations:

Questions, Questions, and More Questions...

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Three questions drive this quarter's analysis of Japan-Korea relations. First, how does one explain the downturn in Seoul-Tokyo relations? Second, what is the likelihood of any new movement in Japan-DPRK normalization dialogue? And third, what is the status of trilateral coordination with Seoul and Tokyo vis-à-vis the new Bush administration?

The Perplexing Nature of Seoul-Tokyo Relations: Same as It Ever Was?

A basic puzzle emerges with regard to the row between Japan and South Korea over textbooks: how does a relationship backslide so dramatically after having been solidly on the path to reconciliation and cooperation since the Kim Dae-jung-Obuchi Keizo summit in October 1998? Less than nine months ago, Seoul-Tokyo relations were humming along with new political commitments to put history behind, improving security dialogue and coordination, and opening a new era in this troubled relationship. In stark contrast this quarter witnessed, among other events, Seoul's recall of its ambassador (April 10), filing of formal diplomatic protests, postponement of joint maritime exercises (May 8), and postponement of joint parliamentarians meetings . . . all because of textbooks. How does one explain this about-face in the relationship?

The pedestrian answer is that things are the same as they ever were. The 2001 textbook controversy destined the Kim-Obuchi summit to the historical trash heap of initiatives dating back to those of Kim Young-sam and Hashimoto Ryutaro in the 1990s, Chun Doo-hwan and Nakasone Yasuhiro in the 1980s, and Park Chung-hee and Sato Eisaku in the 1970s. Talk of a "new era" in relations, sooner or later, succumbs to the demons of history. Not helping matters in this instance was the fact that the Japanese Education Ministry actually approved the controversial textbook revisions that allegedly whitewashed Japan's wartime history (April 3), which had not been the case in other instances of this recurring problem (see "History Haunts, Engagement Dilemmas" *Comparative Connections* Vol. 3, No. 1).

Yet such a response denies that any substantial and positive changes have taken place in Japan-ROK relations. As argued in past issues (see "The Roller Coaster of Expectations" *Comparative Connections* Vol. 2 No. 2), this assessment is wholly untrue and overlooks important advances in relations. What happened in Seoul-Tokyo relations this past

quarter was as much about domestic politics as it was about history and textbooks. In short, it was the wrong issue at the wrong time.

The controversy arose at a time of extreme weakness for the Kim Dae-jung government. Beleaguered by a weak economy, stagnation in North-South relations (as the Bush policy review took place), and an increasingly critical political opposition (smelling lame duck status), Kim Dae-jung's popularity ratings were at their lowest point in his presidency. Given these circumstances, the government could not help but take the hard line on textbooks, recalling its ambassador (April 10) and filing formal protests. Media reports questioned this act as a premature escalation of the dispute that went against Seoul's previous commitments not to allow the issue to spin out of control, but arguably there was a strategy behind this action wholly in line with earlier commitments. Kim sought to appease domestic sentiment with decisive action, take it off the front pages, and work quietly behind the scenes for a resolution. Unfortunately, the absence of other issues kept the national spotlight focused on textbooks and made Kim a prisoner of his own strategy. Having already set the bar high by recalling the ambassador, he could not afford more moderate measures when Tokyo did not respond promptly to ROK entreaties.

Domestic politics factored into Japan's behavior as well. The issue broke well in the midst of a lame duck Mori government and the key decision point in the dispute (i.e., approval of the textbook revisions) came during a transition in the Japanese government. Then Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro was not only on his way out (he announced his resignation three days after the textbook approval), but Koizumi Junichiro was not in place until a good three weeks thereafter. Moreover, once in office and enamored with very high popularity ratings, the new premier arguably had little incentive to draw on this reservoir of goodwill when there clearly are other unpopular issues down the road (i.e., missile defense, and economic packages).

Thus, there is no denying that historical animosity still lives in Seoul-Tokyo relations, but its current negative imprint is the result of an unfortunate confluence of timing and domestic politics (not to mention the Bush "time-out" on North Korea, which robbed Seoul and Tokyo of an overarching imperative for the two countries to work toward). Any skeptics of this viewpoint are reminded of the quarter's events that reinforced the overall positive direction in relations. Despite the friction over textbooks, the two countries stuck to most of their diplomatic schedule, including high-level economic talks on a free trade agreement (June); on the environment (trilaterally with China in April); on the removal of visa requirements for travel (May); on inclusion of Japan in the Tumen River project (April 6); on steel (April); and on preparations for the World Cup. Japanese Foreign Minister Kono Yohei admitted in correspondence with South Korean counterparts that the viewpoints in the textbook do not necessarily reflect those of the government (April 16). His successor, Tanaka Makiko, in meetings with Foreign Minister Han Seung-soo (May 26) reaffirmed Japan's earnest view on history as set forth in 1995 by Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi. Informed American observers also note a sensitivity and sense of urgency informing Japan-ROK discussions on this issue in a manner less evident in Japan-China interaction, attesting to the common values and visions that underlie the former relationship.

Japan-DPRK Relations: Going to Disneyland

There was no movement on the Japan-DPRK front this past quarter. The one development was the bizarre deportation case of a man believed to be Kim Jong-il's eldest son, Kim Jong-nam (born to Kim's second wife Song Hye-rim in 1971). Immigration officers detained the man and his party of three at Narita airport for fraudulent travel documents. Although the papers reported on the man's identity and how his alleged itinerary in Japan included a trip to Disneyworld, of more interest was the intense behind-the-scenes deliberations between the Foreign Ministry and National Police Agency (as well as the Justice Ministry and Prime Minister's Office) about how to deal with the case. The police agency called for the arrest and interrogation of Kim, among other reasons, for the purpose of positively identifying the detainees. The Foreign Ministry intervened, however, calling for immediate deportation to avoid an international and domestic crisis that might only further irritate Japan-DPRK relations. Matters were further complicated by the fact that Japan could not return Kim directly to the North (as Japan has no diplomatic relations with the DPRK) without entering into extraordinary negotiations. As a result, Kim eventually was sent to China. Optimists might see this incident as an opportunity for an improvement of relations as Tokyo's proactive decisions saved Kim Jong-il from a potentially embarrassing situation. Wishful thinking. It will take more than a little face-saving to get the truculent North Koreans to the bargaining table (see below).

Trilateral Coordination: Small Victories

The quarter saw one formal Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) meeting but there were other forms of trilateral policy coordination as well (e.g., Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage's visits to Tokyo and Seoul May 9-11 and former Defense Secretary William Perry's track two dialogues in Honolulu). While the meetings themselves reflect the importance of continuing this institution for the Bush administration, perhaps of most significance was what did *not* happen as a result of these meetings. Press reports and the buzz in Washington prior to Armitage's trip in particular suggested that the U.S. was going to the region to "consult" with allies on opening a discussion on revision of the Agreed Framework.

There are two types of silence the U.S. experiences from its Asian allies. One type signals the quiet but confident support of U.S. policies and presence in the region. The other type of silence is more uneasy, signaling doubts and even opposition to U.S. plans. Individuals in Tokyo and Seoul in official and unofficial venues were uncharacteristically direct and unambiguous in "communicating" to U.S. counterparts the latter silence about their opposition to U.S. attempts at unilaterally leading a discussion on revision of the Agreed Framework. That the U.S. was bound by these views and has not blazed down this alternate path (often discussed during the transition), is testament to the resilience of trilateral coordination.

Outlook

One very negative effect of the textbook row was the postponement of scheduled Japan-ROK maritime search and rescue exercises (May 8). This was to be the second of these exercises (scheduled for early June) that represented an important step forward in Japan-ROK security cooperation. The next slated event is visits in July by Japanese defense officials. If the textbook issue further inflames relations, this could be the next casualty. Also of concern will be how much the current atmosphere of historical friction in South Korea will influence Korean perceptions of Koizumi's statements about re-evaluating the traditional interpretation of Japan's right of collective self-defense.

Stay tuned in Tokyo-Pyongyang relations for a proposal by Japan to deal with the DPRK's Nodong missile exports. There was some speculation this past quarter that the Foreign Ministry has been putting together draft plans to "purchase" all of the North's missile exports to the Middle East. Whether this surfaces formally in the next quarter is hard to tell, but if money talks with the North, then this certainly adds more of it to the normalization equation.

Chronology of Japan-Korea Relations April-June 2001¹

Apr. 3, 2001: Japanese Education Ministry approves the controversial new junior high school history textbook that contains/omits passages allegedly whitewashing past actions during World War II.

Apr. 4, 2001: South Korean FM Han Seung-soo files formal protest over the controversial textbooks.

Apr. 5, 2001: Japanese Supreme Court rejects demands by two ROK citizens for wartime disability pensions while fighting for the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II.

Apr. 6, 2001: The ROK, China, Russia, and Mongolia agree to invite Japan to join the Tumen River Area Development Project.

Apr. 8, 2001: Environment ministers from Japan, South Korea, and China release a joint statement requesting the U.S. positive commitment toward the Kyoto Protocol.

Apr., 8, 2001: ASEAN Plus Three vice finance ministers meet in Kuala Lumpur to discuss measures to stabilize Asia's financial markets hit by dollar's rise versus the yen.

1. Chronology compiled with research assistance of Ouchi Miyuki.

Apr. 9, 2001: The 4th Korea-Japan Steel Dialogue is held.

Apr. 9, 2001: Seoul leaders of the Korea-Japan Parliamentarians Union (KJPU) indefinitely postpone the annual KJPU general assembly slated for May 4-6 in Seoul due to the textbook issue.

Apr. 10, 2001: South Korean Ambassador to Japan Choi Sang-yong temporarily returns home to protest Japan's authorization of controversial textbooks.

Apr. 11, 2001: The Korean Education Ministry establishes a working group to deal with the textbook controversy.

Apr. 15, 2001: *Japan Times* reports that pro-DPRK General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Chongryon) and pro-ROK Korean Residents Union in Japan (Mindan) have reached agreements with cities of Nagasaki and Hiroshima to jointly build memorials for Korean A-bomb victims.

April 16, 2001: Japanese FM Kono Yohei sends a letter to the ROK FM suggesting that the historical viewpoint of some controversial textbooks is independent from that of the Japanese government.

Apr. 19, 2001: Ambassador Choi returns to Japan.

Apr. 20, 2001: Ambassador Choi meets with Minister of Education Nobutaka Machimura on the textbook issue.

Apr. 21, 2001: DPRK official media criticizes Japan for inordinate delay in normalization talks since October.

Apr. 27, 2001: Japan's new Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro has a phone conversation with President Kim Dae-jung. The two agree to closely cooperate in seeking ways to prevent the textbook issue from spoiling bilateral relations.

May 1, 2001: Hatoyama Yukio, leader of the Democratic Party of Japan, visits Seoul.

May 1, 2001: A man believed to be the son and heir-apparent of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-Nam, is caught trying to enter Japan on a false passport.

May 1, 2001: Japanese FM Tanaka states that she will seek a resolution to the textbook dispute.

May 2, 2001: ROK Culture Minister Kim Han-gill meets with Japanese Minister of Education Atsuko Toyama on the textbook issue in Japan.

May 2, 2001: South Korean daily *JoongAng Ilbo* reports that the DPRK asked Japan for 4 billion yen in compensation for victims of the atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and a hospital to treat survivors.

May 3, 2001: Hatoyama Yukio meets President Kim Dae-jung in Seoul and shows deep concerns on the textbook issue.

May 4, 2001: The third economic ASEAN Plus Three ministerial meeting is held in Siem Reap, Cambodia, to discuss ways to further strengthen economic relations.

May 5, 2001: The Japanese government deports a man believed to be the son of Kim Jong-il from Japan.

May 8, 2001: South Korean FM officially demands revisions of the Japanese junior high school history textbooks, pointing out 35 sections that should be revised.

May 8, 2001: The South Korean Defense Ministry announces that it has decided to put off the second Korea-Japan joint maritime search and rescue drills slated for early June to protest Japan's approval of history textbooks.

May 9, 2001: South Korea and Japan agree to cooperate closely with the transport of spectators for 2002 FIFA World Cup matches.

May 10, 2001: Deputy Secretary of State Armitage arrives in Seoul from Tokyo for high-level consultations. *JoongAng Ilbo* reports that the Armitage agenda includes possible revision of the Agreed Framework

May 23, 2001: Four ROK lawmakers apply to a Tokyo court for an injunction against distribution of the controversial history textbooks.

May 26, 2001: TCOG meeting in Honolulu; the three countries reaffirm their commitment to maintaining the 1994 Agreed Framework and support the ROK policy of reconciliation with the North.

May 26, 2001: Japanese FM Tanaka meets with South Korean FM Han in Beijing. The two reaffirm that the tripartite alliance of Japan, the U.S., and the ROK was crucial to the success of DPRK policy.

May 29, 2001: President Kim, in a letter to Japanese PM Koizumi Junichiro, urges the Japanese government to respond swiftly to Seoul's demands for textbook revisions.

May 30, 2001: Ambassador Choi expresses concern over PM Koizumi's plan to visit Yasukuni Shrine on August 15, the anniversary of Japan's surrender in WWII.

June 1, 2001: The Osaka District Court orders the Osaka prefectural government to pay a 34,000 yen monthly medical allowance to a 76-year-old South Korean atomic victim.

June 4, 2001: *Tokyo Shimbun* reports that Japan is pushing for the purchase of all North Korea Rodong missiles produced for export to Middle Eastern countries.

June 7, 2001: Japan officials announce that they will deny visas to DPRK party officials seeking to enter Japan to attend protests against the publication of history textbooks.

June 11-12 2001: The First Tripartite Round Table on Environmental Industry (China, Japan, and South Korea) is held in Seoul.

June 12, 2001: South Korea and Japan hold high-level economic talks in Seoul, covering negotiations aimed at concluding an investment pact and consideration of a free trade agreement.

June 16, 2001: *AP* reports that Tsuda Gakuen Junior High School, a private school in Mie Prefecture, is the first school that intends to adopt the controversial history textbook.

June 19, 2001: Japanese government bans South Korean ships from fishing for sanma (saury) off the Sanriku coast in retaliation for an agreement between Russia and South Korea that allows South Korea to fish near the four disputed Russian-held islands that make up the Northern Territories. South Korea strongly urges Japan to withdraw this decision immediately.

June 25, 2001: South Korean FM Han summons the Japanese ambassador, Terada Terusuke, to demand the lifting of a ban on South Korean fishing boats from waters claimed by Japan.