



Japan-ROK Relations: Seoul-Tokyo Cooperation on North Korea, Tried, Tested, and True (thus far)

Victor Cha

Three themes emerge from the interaction and events of the past quarter in Japan-Republic of Korea (ROK) relations. First, cooperation on issues of security and history continued between these two American allies, achieving certain milestones. Second, from a U.S. perspective, this cooperation paid dividends in terms of averting a Taepodong II crisis with North Korea. Third, the success in coordinating policy, both bilaterally and in a trilateral context with the United States, will again be tested as the focus of activity in the “post-Berlin” phase of the North Korea problem is likely to shift to the Japan-DPRK dyad.

Seoul and Tokyo: Milestones and Stepping Stones

The highlight in terms of military cooperation was the joint naval exercises held in August 1999. Involving three Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force (JMSDF) destroyers, two ROK destroyers, various aerial and intelligence support, and over 1000 soldiers, the five-day joint exercises featured a search and rescue (SAR) operation in the waters between the two countries. This was followed by joint formation training and tactical maneuvers returning to Japan where the two ROK destroyers made a goodwill port call at Sasebo. Both governments remained deliberately low-key about the event, emphasizing the non-military nature of SARs in select statements. There were no celebrations and in clear deference to historical sensitivities ROK naval officials abstained from holding press briefings on the exercises. Nevertheless, a milestone in Japan-ROK security relations was quietly achieved. Both the SAR and the Korean port calls in Japan were the first of their kind in the history of relations (the latter following up on Japan’s first naval vessel port call to Korea in 1994). The SAR was the realization of military-to-military cooperation that had been urged by the United States for some time and, in fact, had been agreed upon in principle by Seoul and Tokyo as far back as 1979 but never implemented.

In this sense, the exercises represented an important shift from talk to action. Finally, while the exercises ostensibly focused on rescuing distressed civilian ships, they were clearly orchestrated with an eye to preparing the two for cooperation in the case of contingencies involving the North, again, something that had been talked about a great deal among Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo but not acted upon until this past August.

Complementing these military developments was slow but steady progress toward liquidating the acidic history between the two countries. The 1998 Kim-Obuchi summit was a particularly important start in this regard, but the stepping stone for another major breakthrough

was laid this quarter with Seoul's official invitation for Emperor Akihito to visit Korea. Expectations are high that Akihito's visit can once and for all end the tortured history of imperial apologies. Judging from the past attempts, there is little to be optimistic about. Abruptly canceled plans for a Park Chung-hee and Hirohito meeting in the 1970s; the ambiguous Showa apology in 1983; and Japanese refusal of ROK requests for Hirohito to visit Seoul in the mid 1980s (for reasons of safety) all started out as well-intentioned acts that ended up stoking the fires of history rather than dousing them. Nevertheless, one would like to believe that different attitudes in different times will lead to different and more positive outcomes. An early indication of this was Seoul's conspicuous silence over Japan's decision to enshrine the flag and imperial hymn as national symbols. Seoul refused to join the chorus of invectives slung by the likes of Beijing and Pyongyang at the Japanese decision, attesting to the genuine intention to reconstruct a new history between the two countries.

The Path Out of Berlin: "Red Lines" and Coordination

Clearly the big event of the quarter was the U.S.-DPRK agreement in Berlin. Pyongyang's informal moratorium on missile testing in exchange for a partial lifting of U.S. sanctions averted another potential crisis with the irascible North Koreans. This pattern of negotiation and brinkmanship, dating back to the 1994 Agreed Framework, has become familiar, albeit no less comforting, as the outcome in each iteration always remains uncertain.

While the U.S. and DPRK were the primary protagonists in Berlin, the non-conflictual outcome owed greatly to Seoul and Tokyo's efforts. Both governments explicated clear "red lines" with regard to their respective engagement policies. The Obuchi government threatened the suspension of KEDO funding, sanctions, and controls on remittances in response to another DPRK missile test. The Kim government reluctantly admitted that its treasured Sunshine Policy could not survive another Taepodong flight test. These clear enunciations of "sticks" were important because they communicated to the DPRK the limits of engagement, thereby making the strategy more credible than an open-ended engagement policy (read: appeasement).

In addition to these actions, policy coordination among the allies worked. What was different about this round of interaction with the North compared with the past was Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo's coordinated messages to the North. Moreover, when there were subtle disagreements, the allies were able to accommodate each other and maintain a united front. For example, initial Japanese references to suspension of KEDO funding if the North Koreans launched ran counter to U.S. and ROK desires to see KEDO's de-nuclearization objective fulfilled irrespective of the missile problem. Through quiet and deliberate consultations, positions were subtly adjusted such that later on in the crisis, Japanese threats of punishment focused less on KEDO and more on the remittances issue. In addition, the three allies emphasized the positive incentives that could come out of DPRK cooperation. This sort of coordination confounded any DPRK hopes of leverage by driving a wedge between the allies. The U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral coordination and oversight group (TCOG) created by the Perry policy review, was the primary instrument of this policy coordination and is among the most important accomplishments of the congressionally-mandated review.

On the (new) Road Again: Japan-DPRK Normalization?

If the North Korean negotiators are half as smart as the world credits them with being, one has to question what drove them to cooperate in Berlin. After all, the partial lifting of U.S. sanctions will be of little positive material consequence for the North (would you invest in North Korea?), so why give up your last bargaining chip (i.e., missiles) for this? One possible explanation is that they did not in fact give up this chip in Berlin, but merely held it in abeyance to use again later. Another hypothesis is that the North Koreans cooperated in Berlin because they unwittingly negotiated themselves into a crisis, and needed a face-saving way out even if it meant conceding, at least temporarily, on their cherished sovereign right to test missiles. Yet another is that the North cooperated because it valued not the removal of sanctions but the progress toward a more normal and less threatening relationship with the U.S. that this act symbolized. All are plausible explanations, but past patterns of negotiating behavior make it difficult to imagine the North acting without very tangible material motives. This is why a highly plausible driver of DPRK actions in Berlin is the potential for cash emerging out of an improvement of relations with Japan. Statements by Obuchi prior to Berlin made clear that a road to normalization talks, food aid, sanctions lifting, and other good things could be opened by a positive outcome in Berlin. The DPRK also made its intentions known by releasing in August, on the occasion of the 49th anniversary of independence, a set of principles for reconciliation with Japan. These required that the Japanese abandon a policy of hostility to the North, make a sincere apology, and provide full compensation for past injustices. Although the substance of the statement was far from novel, the timing is believed by some DPRK watchers to indicate Pyongyang's active interest in heading down this road. Subsequent statements by DPRK foreign ministry officials (e.g., Vice Minister Pak Tong-chun) were also unusually specific in their openness to restart official talks between Pyongyang and Tokyo, now suspended for seven years, provided Japan abandon its policy of "hostility."

Of the various dyads that define the security problem in Korea, the Japan-DPRK relationship may therefore see relatively more activity in the near future. Critical variables that will determine outcomes on this dyad are: 1) whether Pyongyang makes concessions on homecoming visits for Japanese spouses in the DPRK and the troublesome kidnapping accusations; 2) how well the Obuchi government can move forward with DPRK talks for security reasons and manage domestic dissatisfaction with what is certain to be less-than-forthcoming DPRK responses to the homecoming and kidnapping issues; and 3) most important, whether Tokyo is able to leverage a normalization settlement for a more formal moratorium on DPRK missile tests. These are not easy issues. Moreover, past experience highlights the potential for friction between Seoul and Tokyo. Throughout the history of post-normalized relations, the most accurate predictor of problems between the ROK and Japan has been the latter's initiatives to the North. This was the case in the late 1940s over repatriation issues, in the 1970s over détente, and in the early 1990s over early Japanese initiatives to normalize relations at the end of the Cold War. Seoul has complained that progress in Tokyo-Pyongyang relations undercuts the DPRK's incentives for engaging in North-South dialogue. Historical animosity also rears its ugly head in accusations that the Japanese do such things to keep the Peninsula divided.

At the same time, though, many of the traditional obstacles are absent today. The Kim Dae-jung government, unlike past South Korean governments, does not oppose and even encourages fulfillment of a "two-plus-four" cross-recognition on the Korean Peninsula of which

Tokyo-Pyongyang would be a critical missing piece. In addition, strategic thinking in Seoul, Washington, and Tokyo at the executive and legislative levels has, for the most part, come to the realization that engagement is the only feasible policy at the moment, and that “carrots” now are wise because they can also be rescinded later as “sticks” if the situation warrants. The TCOG will once again have its work cut out in managing these complex and cross-cutting dynamics.

Chronology of Japan-ROK Relations

July – September 1999

July 1, 1999: Japan approves \$1 billion funding for KEDO and sends Terusuke Terada, Japanese Ambassador to KEDO, to North Korea in order to improve Japanese-North Korean bilateral relations.

July 6, 1999: Japanese Ambassador to the U.S. Kunihiko Saito says that a North Korean missile launch would have dire consequences for Japanese engagement efforts.

July 6, 1999: UN Undersecretary General Yasushi Akashi, who visited the North Korea from June 29 to July 3, indicates in an interview with *Yomiuri Shimbun* that North Korea has made no progress toward normalization of relations with Japan.

July 8, 1999: Japanese lawmakers claim that DPRK missile development has benefited from Japanese technology and urges tighter export controls.

July 12, 1999: ROK defense officials believe that DPRK preparations at the missile launch site in North Hamkyong province are close to completion.

July 12, 1999: Spokesman for South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade expresses concern over Japan’s shipment of nuclear fuel by sea.

July 13, 1999: Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Hiromu Nanaka reiterates Japan’s position that it would freeze support for KEDO if North Korea launches another missile.

July 14, 1999: Koreshige Anami, chief of the Asian Bureau at the Japanese Foreign Ministry, and Cho Jung-pyo, head of South Korea’s Asia-Pacific Affairs Bureau, meet to discuss bolstering Japan-South Korea security ties.

July 15, 1999: President Kim Dae-jung and Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi agree that China’s accession to the WTO is desirable.

July 16, 1999: South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade says that Japan has made it clear that it will not consider shipping nuclear fuel through waters near the Korea Strait.

July 21, 1999: Before a pro-Seoul association of Korean residents in Japan, President Kim Dae-jung says that Japanese Emperor Akihito will eventually visit Seoul. Kim also indicates that it is a matter of time before the Korean community in Japan can vote in local elections.

July 27, 1999: Japanese Defense Agency (JDA) releases the 1999 white paper, highlighting the DPRK missile threat and calling for Japan to improve its intelligence-gathering capabilities while promoting cooperation and coordination with the ROK and U.S.

July 27, 1999: South Korea, Japan, and Russia say that they would welcome North Korea's membership in the ASEAN Regional Forum

July 27, 1999: South Korean Foreign Minister Hong-Soon-young, Japanese Foreign Minister Masahiko Komura, and U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright issue a joint call after ASEAN meeting in Singapore urging North Korea to accept the joint peace package offered by Perry in May.

July 27, 1999: Japanese Foreign Minister Masahiko Komura reiterates that another North Korean missile test will make it very difficult for Japan to keep its KEDO obligations.

July 27, 1999: South Korean Defense Ministry spokesman announces that the South Korean and Japanese navies will conduct a joint search and rescue drill in waters between the two countries early next month. Japanese and Korean naval vessels and helicopters will take part in the exercise.

July 29, 1999: On a three-day visit to Korea, U.S. Secretary of Defense William Cohen warns that North Korea will jeopardize relations with South Korea, Japan, and the United States if it fires another ballistic missile

Aug 4, 1999: Liberal Democratic Party lawmakers in Japan said that Japan should suspend cash remittances to North Korea if it test-launches a second ballistic missile.

Aug 5, 1999: Korea and Japan hold a joint search-and-rescue exercise in international waters, involving Korean and Japanese navy vessels, aircraft, and helicopters, and 1,200 sailors. North Korea denounced the exercise as a move by South Korea and Japan to launch a war against it.

Aug 6, 1999: Two South Korean destroyers make goodwill port call in Sasebo, Japan, after conclusion of joint exercises.

Aug 6, 1999: Financial Supervisory Commission (FSC) announces that the Industrial Bank of Korea (IBK) will set up a joint venture credit information firm with Japan's Teikoku Data Bank.

Aug 8, 1999: Japanese Foreign Minister Masahiko Komura says that Japan may cut off money sent from pro-DPRK Koreans living in Japan if North Korea conducts another missile test.

Aug 9, 1999: Tokyo passed a bill recognizing its wartime, rising sun flag (Hinomaru) and imperial anthem (Kimigayo).

Aug 11, 1999: President Kim Dae-jung says that South Korea, the U.S., and Japan are making last-minute appeals to North Korea to drop its plan to test-fire a missile. He also says that the three countries have agreed that KEDO will still move forward if a missile test occurs.

Aug 10, 1999: On 54th anniversary of Korean independence day, the DPRK issues a comprehensive exposition on principles and pre-conditions for reconciliation with Japan

Aug 17, 1999: Korean officials announce that South Korean Foreign Affairs and Trade Minister Hong Soon-young will meet with Japanese Foreign Minister Masahiko Komura in Japan during August 22-24 to discuss the two governments' North Korea policy, Korean-Japanese residents' voting rights, and the trade imbalance.

Aug 23, 1999: South Korean Foreign Affairs and Trade Ministry announces that Korea and Japan agreed to set up a diplomatic hotline between their foreign ministries to maintain close consultations on pending diplomatic issues such as the North's missile threat.

Aug 23, 1999: During their joint meeting in Japan, South Korean and Japanese foreign ministers agree to hold bilateral negotiations soon over an investment pact to promote greater mutual investment.

Aug 26, 1999: South Korean Presidential aide Hwang Won-tak says that North Korea appears to be using the threat of a missile launch as a leverage in negotiations with the U.S. and Japan, and North Korea may demand hard currency from Japan in return for not testing a missile.

Sept 1, 1999: South Korean Prime Minister Kim Jong-pil leaves for a five-day official visit to Japan; conveys official invitation for Emperor Akihito to visit Korea.

Sept 1, 1999: Japanese Foreign Minister Masahiko Komura says that the Japanese government could ease sanctions imposed on North Korea if progress is made in the forthcoming missile talks between the U.S. and the North Korea.

Sept 2, 1999: During an official trip to Japan, South Korean Prime Minister Kim Jong-pil proposes the creation of an East Asian economic community involving Korea, Japan, China, and Russia and reiterated call for the creation of an Asian Monetary Fund (AMF).

Sept 8, 1999: South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade announces that Korea and Japan agreed to expedite efforts to sign a bilateral investment treaty.

Sept 9, 1999: Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Hiromu Nonaka says that Japan is interested in resuming dialogue with North Korea if the missile threat subsides.

Sept 12, 1999: U.S., Japan, and South Korea reconfirm joint stance on North Korea and agree at the APEC Summit in Auckland to boost ties with Pyongyang if it lifts its missile threat.

Sept 14, 1999: Japanese Defense Agency Chief Hosei Norota says that North Korea has not frozen plans for a missile launch, despite U.S. claims to the contrary.

Sept 15, 1999: The Perry review on DPRK policy presented to President Clinton.

Sept 16, 1999: Officials of the South Korean Ministry of Construction and Transportation and their Japanese counterparts met in Seoul to discuss ways to improve cooperation in construction.

Sept 17, 1999: President Clinton eases sanctions against DPRK. Seoul and Tokyo support the decision.

Sept 18, 1999: President Kim Dae-jung states the need for the United States, South Korea, and Japan to adopt a “win-win” strategy in dealing with the North. He also said the three allies, as well as the North, would benefit from each other.

Sept 25, 1999: KEDO holds meeting with North Korea to discuss pending issues concerning the construction of two light-water nuclear reactors.

Sept 29, 1999: Japanese Ambassador to Seoul Kazuo Ogura proposes several ways of enhancing South Korean-Japanese ties, including an undersea tunnel, the joint launch of a weather satellite, the establishment of a Eurasian gas pipeline, and a free trade zone.