

Japan-Korea Relations:

## The Emperor Has No (Soccer) Shoes

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Japanese Emperor Akihito will not be attending the opening ceremony of the World Cup soccer games in Seoul on May 31, but this hardly dampened a very strong quarter in Japan-South Korea relations. A glimmer of light shone on long-frozen normalization dialogue between Japan and North Korea, but Pyongyang's tactical motives do not raise confidence that a thaw is evident. Prospects were least bright this quarter in trilateral policy coordination involving the United States, Japan, and South Korea.

### Seoul-Tokyo: Achieving Normalcy

Cooperation between Japan and South Korea was evident on a number of fronts, giving the relationship a sense of normalcy that had been absent since the history based disputes over the past summer (see "Questions, Questions, and More Questions..." *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 3 No. 2). The new year got off to a good start as the two leaders, South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro, exchanged messages pledging to strengthen bilateral cooperation for the co-hosting of the upcoming World Cup and proclaiming 2002 the "Year of People Exchanges" between the two countries. Contrary to conventional wisdom, a significant barometer of the relationship's health has been cooperation on political-military issues, not economics or history. The latter two variables are important (as discussed below) and remain somewhat constant, a low-level irritant in relations (i.e., it is evident in the relationship both in good and bad times), but the former is often driven by market forces. On military issues, the two governments resumed annual security talks (Feb. 4) on North Korea as well as agreed to reschedule a series of military exchanges and joint exercises that had been suspended last year as a result of the row over history textbooks. Among the planned activities are joint maritime search-and-rescue exercises in the seas off Cheju Island and the exchange of visits of high-level defense officials and port calls in 2002.

A watershed is anticipated later this year with regard to UN peacekeeping operations (PKO) in East Timor. Japan's *Asahi Shimbun* reported in early February that a contingent of Self-Defense Forces (SDF) scheduled for dispatch to East Timor will undertake repair and maintenance of road infrastructure and disaster relief at a number of sites. Of significance, as reported in the *Asahi*, was the size of the SDF dispatch (the largest ever), but of potentially greater significance is that one of the planned sites

already hosts a South Korean PKO unit, which would mean that Japanese and South Korean troops could engage in PKO cooperation for the first time in history.

On the economic front, Seoul and Tokyo signed a bilateral investment agreement and began discussions about a free trade area. The investment agreement, the highlight of the Kim-Koizumi summit meeting in Seoul (March 21-23), gives “most favored nation” treatment to investors in both countries and allows the transfer of funds to the home country without discrimination. It is the first such agreement South Korea has entered into with a foreign country and should constitute a major spur to economic cooperation. A Japan-South Korean Free Trade Agreement (FTA) came a step closer to reality when Kim and Koizumi at the March summit agreed to establish a joint research committee of government, business, and academic experts by June 2002 to explore the potential of such an accord. Although there are numerous details to be worked out and obstacles to be overcome (e.g., agriculture), the elevation of this issue from a largely track-two dialogue to track “1.5” is a significant and requisite step.

On historical issues, the two governments agreed to start a joint study (in March) to promote mutual understanding. The two-year project will be undertaken by a panel of 10 historians to contend with, and seek some common view on, the differing interpretations of the pre-1945 period. Although this is a commendable and needed act in the wake of the problems of last year, whether this joint panel will actually resolve any issues is highly questionable. History disputes between Koreans and Japanese, although driven by national identity, politics, and emotion, are at their base historiographical debates rarely settled by a panel of experts. In the end the key, as has been the case between the two countries, is political will. President Kim Dae-jung exercised some of this in his March 1 Independence Movement (*samilchol*) speech. Commemorating the peaceful uprising by Koreans against Japanese colonial rule in 1919, the speech offered a golden opportunity to stoke the fires of anti-Japan sentiment. Kim referred to Koreans rising up against Japan and the hardship of colonial rule, but did not attach any inflammatory rhetoric, deliberately refraining from taking the nationalism bait. This restraint was as important as anything positive the two leaders could have done to rid the history demons.

Perhaps the biggest blessing in disguise for Seoul-Tokyo relations was the replacement of the Japanese foreign minister this past quarter. This is not because Tanaka Makiko inherited the same ambivalence toward South Korea as her father, but because of the former foreign minister’s general absence of interest in foreign policy matters overall. What this created, some bureaucrats argue, was an uncomfortable but necessary side-channel from subordinate levels in the Foreign Ministry to the chief Cabinet secretary on issues that required action. Because directors could not circumvent the foreign minister on every issue, this channel was reserved for high priority, tier-one concerns. What this gerrymandering meant was that low priority, tier-three issues continued to be resolved within the Foreign Ministry bureaucracy, but middle-level, tier-two issues (like Korea) suffered from lack of attention at the top levels and lack of authority within the bureaucracy. This will hopefully change under the new foreign minister.

**Japan-North Korea: A Glimmer...**

The end of the quarter saw some modest movement in the long-stalled dialogue between Japan and North Korea (see “Quicksand” and “On Track and Off Course Again” *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 3 No. 3 and Vol. 3 No. 4). The pretext for a potential meeting between the Japanese Health Minister Sakaguchi Chikara and a North Korean counterpart in Singapore was Tokyo’s decision in March to allow atomic bomb survivors living abroad to receive treatment and health care allowances in Japan (including subsidized travel by the Health, Labor, and Welfare Ministry). Preceding this, the North Korean Red Cross Society reversed an earlier decision and announced its willingness to resume the search for missing Japanese citizens allegedly abducted to the North, which has been the primary political obstacle to the restarting of normalization talks suspended since the winter of 2000. As an act of good faith, the North also repatriated Sugishima Takashi, a former Japanese journalist who had been detained for over two years.

Some explain this new glimmer of hope as a sign of Japanese desperation to get something going with the North Koreans. Nothing could be more wrong. Whenever there are stalls or lurches forward in North Korea’s relations with other countries, the primary variable lies north of the DMZ. In other words, in the Sunshine Policy era of interaction with North Korea, potential partners, including Seoul, Tokyo, and European Unions capitals, have generally been consistent in terms of their interest in, and incentives proffered for, improving relations.

So what has prompted Pyongyang to look in Tokyo’s direction this quarter? One immediate reason has to do with the North’s food shortage. David Morton of the World Food Program noted in March that food stocks are likely to run out in April or May, and absent further donations, a crisis might ensue by July. Part of the shortfall in donations stems from increased international attention to Afghanistan. But another key factor is the significant reduction in Japanese donations thus far this year, which constituted the largest contribution in 2001 (500 million tons).

A second reason relates to a conscious strategy of late by Pyongyang to “omnibalance” against the harder line emanating from the Bush administration in the aftermath of the now famous “axis of evil” statements in the president’s State of the Union address in January. From early February, the North sought to consolidate relations with all parties in the region. This started with North Korean leader Kim Jong-il’s meeting with Chinese Ambassador Wu Donghe, followed by meetings with Russian officials in Pyongyang. It ended this quarter with South Korean special envoy Lim Dong-won’s three-day mission to the North and meetings with Kim Jong-il. In between these events, the North made its modest overtures to Tokyo in the apparent hope that it could create some consensus in the region to check the Americans.

Although any improvement in relations is useful, there is little reason to be confident about how much further forward this fragile dialogue between Tokyo and Pyongyang will go. This is largely because the one clear message that emerges from apparent DPRK rationales for re-engaging Japan is that they represent tactical short-term incentives (i.e., food and omnibalancing) rather than any deeper long-term commitment to reconciliation

and normalization. As long as this remains the case, Japan continues to respond to the North, as Koizumi stated, with great caution. The Koizumi government made clear that it is not so starved for movement with the North that it is willing to compromise on the issues important to it. For example, government or police officials stated on *eight* separate occasions this quarter the importance of resolving the abductions issue. Koizumi and Foreign Ministry officials communicated this not only to the Japanese public, but also to President Bush (during the February summit) and the United Nations (Feb. 27). The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) even released a brochure in English to increase international awareness. Drawing more attention were the revelations this quarter surrounding Yao Megumi, a former wife of a Japanese Red Army member, who admitted to kidnapping Japanese students to North Korea in the early 1980s.

To drive home the point, Tokyo officials intimated a *quid pro quo* on the release of the remainder of its food contributions and North Korean movement on the abduction issue. Nongovernmental organization types subsequently criticized Tokyo's actions as the first attempt by an Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) country to explicitly link humanitarian aid with politics, but frankly speaking who is the real human-rights violator here – an avowed international aid contributor that has justifiably grown disillusioned at the behavior of the recipient, or a recipient that leverages the well-being of its own citizens for regime survival?

### **Trilateral Coordination: An Eye for an Eye**

The least encouraging developments were found on the trilateral front this past quarter. The problem was not the meeting of the U.S.-Japan-ROK Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) in late-January. Attended by Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James Kelly, Deputy Foreign Minister Yim Sung-joon, and Japanese Foreign Ministry Director General Tanaka Hitoshi, the TCOG meetings focused on Bush's upcoming swing through Asia and on ways to reinvigorate dialogue with the DPRK. At these meetings, the United States reiterated its desire to enter into dialogue with North Korea without preconditions. These meetings were fine.

The problem came later. In March, the White House announced that the United States would not certify to the Congress that Pyongyang was adhering to the 1994 Agreed Framework. Bush used a national security "waiver" that enabled the U.S. to provide for the annual delivery of 500 metric tons of heavy fuel oil in spite of asserting DPRK noncompliance. Some may argue that in the end, this amounted only to a message-sending exercise by Bush to Pyongyang while remaining within the bounds of the Framework's terms. The meaning for trilateral policy coordination, however, was more grave. The Bush administration's actions on noncompliance, at least as covered in U.S. newspapers, appeared to have been contemplated and implemented with little, if any, consultation with Seoul or Tokyo. Indeed, the allies were at best "consulted" (i.e., informed) of the decision *ex post facto*.

The quarter closed with the announcement by Seoul that special envoy Lim Dong-won would be dispatched to Pyongyang in an effort to restart inter-Korean dialogue. What

was most significant about this surprise announcement in the context of trilateral policy coordination was that again appeared to be little prior consultation and only notification of the allies before hand. An eye for an eye appears to have been the name of this game.

## **Outlook**

Important TCOG meetings will take place at the beginning of April in which the U.S. “Blueprint” for DPRK dialogue and Lim’s trip to Pyongyang will be the main topics of discussion. On the Seoul-Tokyo front, the big story will of course be the World Cup, which will provide more opportunities for face-to-face meetings between Kim and Koizumi to cement relations.

## **Chronology of Japan-Korea Relations January-March 2002<sup>1</sup>**

**Jan. 1, 2002:** Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro and ROK President Kim Dae-jung exchange new year’s messages, expressing hope for greater cooperation.

**Jan. 5, 2002:** PM Koizumi vows to guard Japan against foreign threats after the sinking of a suspected North Korean spy ship in the East China Sea in December 2001.

**Jan. 7, 2002:** Japanese authorities board a North Korean cargo ship docked near Tokyo after a tip that several suspicious people had slipped ashore.

**Jan. 10, 2002:** Japanese Transport Minister Ogi Chikage states that debris recovered from an unidentified ship that sank in the East China Sea in December 2001 links the ship to North Korea.

**Jan. 15, 2002:** Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Fukuda Yasuo signals the possibility of seeking U.S. support in lifting the unidentified ship that sank in the East China Sea in December.

**Jan. 18, 2002:** ROK officials state that South Korea and Japan will resume military exchanges and joint exercises that were suspended last year.

**Jan 20, 2002:** ROK Foreign Minister Han Seung-soo begins a four-day trip to Japan to hold talks with Japanese Foreign Minister Tanaka Makiko and participate in an international conference on rebuilding Afghanistan.

**Jan. 21, 2002:** Japan and the ROK officially launch the “year of people’s exchange,” aimed at promoting friendship between the two countries and successfully hosting the World Cup.

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1. Compiled with research assistance from Ichino Mayumi.

**Jan. 24, 2002:** The *Tokyo Shimbun* reports that diplomats from Japan and North Korea met secretly in China on Jan. 12-14 after the sinking of an unidentified ship in the East China Sea in December 2001.

**Jan. 24, 2002:** South Korea and Japan sign a tentative agreement on criminal extradition following nearly two years of negotiations.

**Jan. 25, 2002:** Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) meets in Seoul.

**Jan. 30, 2002:** Civic groups in South Korea and Japan announce the launch of a joint organization, the "History Education Asia Network," to correct and prevent historical distortions in Japanese textbooks.

**Feb. 4, 2002:** Japan and South Korea resume annual security talks in Tokyo and discuss North Korea policy and peacekeeping in East Timor.

**Feb. 8, 2002:** Defectors from North Korea state that food aid to the country was being stored for military use rather than distributed to the people.

**Feb. 9, 2002:** Japanese FM Kawaguchi Yoriko holds phone talks with her South Korean counterpart, Choi Sung-hong.

**Feb. 12, 2002:** Pyongyang abruptly releases Japanese journalist Sugishima Takashi, who had been accused of spying and held for over two years.

**Feb. 27, 2002:** Japan and South Korea agree to relax immigration procedures for each other's nationals during the World Cup soccer tournament.

**March 1, 2002:** President Kim refrains from criticizing Japan in his March 1 Independent Movement speech.

**March 5, 2002:** Japan and South Korea announce the establishment of a "Korea-Japan Joint History Research Group," a joint history forum composed of 10 civilian experts from the two nations.

**March 8, 2002:** FM Choi and FM Kawaguchi hold talks in Tokyo; they agree a more aggressive effort is needed to restart dialogue with North Korea.

**March 10, 2002:** ROK Grand National Party (GNP) leader Lee Hoi-chang makes a four-day trip to Japan.

**March 12, 2002:** The Japanese government notifies South Korea that it would not provide humanitarian aid, including food, to the DPRK until relations with the North improve.

**March 12, 2002:** PM Koizumi promises a thorough investigation into the disappearance of Arimoto Keiko, a Japanese female university student suspected of being kidnapped by North Korean agents.

**March 13, 2002:** Yao Megumi, the former wife of a Red Army member who hijacked a Japan Airlines flight in 1970, testifies in a Tokyo court that she helped to lure a young Japanese woman, Arimoto Keiko, from Europe to North Korea in 1983. Yao states that a North Korean diplomat was involved in the abduction.

**March 16-17, 2002:** Newspapers report that North Korean and Japanese officials meet in Beijing over the issue of Japanese nationals allegedly abducted by North Korea.

**March 19, 2002:** President Kim calls for a “future-oriented” relationship between South Korea and Japan, rather than one that is “chained to the past history.”

**March 22-25, 2002:** President Kim and PM Koizumi meet in Seoul. They vow to begin a new era of friendship as the co-hosts of the World Cup and agree to launch a joint study on the establishment of a free trade area between the two nations.

**March 22, 2002:** A spokesman for the Central Committee of the Red Cross Society of the DPRK indicates willingness to hold talks with the Japan Red Cross Society over the issue of “missing persons” allegedly abducted by North Korea.

**March 28, 2002:** Japanese officials state that Japan, South Korea, and the European Union will jointly urge the U.S. to drop its tariffs on steel imports at a WTO dispute-settlement meeting set for April 11 in Geneva.