

Japan-Korea Relations:
What a Difference A Year Makes....

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Last September, Japan-DPRK relations looked to have made a major breakthrough with the unprecedented visit of Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro to Pyongyang. *Rodong Sinmun* marked the anniversary this year by warning about an “unavoidable” war between the DPRK and Japan. The Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) remained active this quarter prior to and in the aftermath of the six-party talks over the DPRK’s nuclear weapons. Japan played a “starring role” in Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) exercises in the Coral Sea.

Japan-DPRK Relations

What a difference a year makes. Last September, Japan-DPRK relations looked to have made a major breakthrough with the unprecedented visit of Prime Minister Koizumi to Pyongyang. North Korean leader Kim Jong-il hosted Koizumi for hours of discussions and the joint declaration (known as the Pyongyang Declaration) committed both leaders to resume long-suspended normalization talks. Japan made a statement of regret regarding the colonial past, while the DPRK boldly admitted, and apologized for, several abductions of Japanese nationals in the past. Even the most skeptical analysts had to admit that this was a watershed event that potentially spelled positively for future Tokyo-Pyongyang relations.

The watershed summit’s one-year anniversary (Sept. 17, 2003) could not have been a more vivid example of how fluid East Asian relations can be. The newspaper of Pyongyang’s ruling Korea Workers Party, *Rodong Sinmun*, marked the occasion by warning about an “unavoidable” war between the DPRK and Japan. Since the summit, Koizumi has suspended food aid and humanitarian assistance to the DPRK, overseen the budgetary go-ahead for missile defense, and been an active participant in the PSI exercises in the region.

On virtually every indicator of bilateral relations, Japan-DPRK relations have sunk to new lows. Bilateral trade has dropped dramatically as a result of nuclear tensions with North Korea and continued Japanese anger over the abductions cases. Exports to the DPRK in the first two quarters of 2003 are down 31 percent and imports down 18.5

percent from the prior year's period. By May 2003, Japanese exports to the DPRK recorded their lowest total in eight year (¥8 billion).

Part of this decline is symptomatic of the overall state of relations, but it is also consonant with the Japanese political decision (beginning in earnest last quarter but dating back to the first quarter of 2003, see "Contemplating Sanctions," *Comparative Connections*, April 2003, Vol. 5, No. 1) to heighten customs inspections and surveillance of DPRK ships ferrying to Japan. The cargos of these ferries have been the subject of great speculation as many believe the North imports numerous "dual-use" products, missile parts, and illicit funds through this channel. Japan continued with operations begun last quarter to monitor these ships in an unprecedented strict fashion.

In August, the DPRK ferry *Mangyongbong-92* made its first port call at Niigata in seven months. Because of tighter safety and customs procedures by Japan as well as angry protests at the port, the North Koreans protested by recalling the ship on at least two occasions prior to the August visit. The sorts of activities that surrounded this obscure ferry's journey from Wonsan to Niigata offer a case study in not only the state of political relations, but also the diligence of the Japanese in tightening the screws. The ferry, upon its arrival in Japan, was secured by 1,500 police as both demonstrators against and supporters of the ferry's arrival (the latter from the Chosen Soren) were in attendance.

The vessel subsequently underwent an eight-hour Port State Control inspection by Transport Ministry officials that revealed a number of safety violations, and then underwent another set of inspections to ensure that the proper repairs had been made. Coterminal with these inspections, there was also a thorough inventory and inspection of the cargo and passengers. Japanese authorities blocked the ship from leaving port for the return trip to Wonsan until the safety repairs were confirmed. The ship returned to Japan in September ferrying supplies and goods in preparation for the DPRK's 55th anniversary celebrations, again meeting with scrutiny by transport authority officials for safety violations, inspections of cargo by 100 customs officials, and protests in Niigata from groups shouting "go home" and "give our children back." Such scrutiny is a far cry from past practices when the *Mangyongbong-92* made nearly 30 trips annually between Wonsan and Niigata as the only direct link between the two countries and received little attention regarding its cargo or passenger manifests.

Japanese Participation in PSI

The customs and safety inspections undertaken by Japanese officials with the *Mangyongbong-92* represents, in theory, one aspect of the U.S.-led PSI that focuses on the "import" side of stopping the transfer of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) materials. The 11-member PSI seeks to create practices, to enhance coordination (police

and military), and to synchronize domestic legal procedures in order to restrict the potential transfer of WMD materials. There are three critical stages to this initiative: 1) export controls; 2) import controls; and 3) interception in-transit. Until this past quarter, of these three activities, Japanese officials publicly and privately were comfortable with all but interception activities (particularly in the absence of a UN resolution). Practices at Niigata confirmed that the Japanese did not hesitate to scrutinize the import and export stages.

But the past quarter saw Japan play a very prominent and active part in PSI exercises designed to practice the interception of vessels. The first of these PSI exercises, known as Pacific Protector, took place Sept. 13-14 in the Coral Sea near Australia. The exercises simulated the interception and boarding of vessels suspected of smuggling WMD materials through international waters. United States, French, and Australian naval vessels and aircraft participated in the drill and seven other nations acted as observers. But the big story was Japan. As the *Asahi Shimbun* reported (Sept. 15, 2003), Japan played a “starring role” in the maritime exercise. A Japanese Coast Guard patrol ship (*Shikishima*) pursued the suspect vessel and in coordination with other participants succeeded in blocking an attempted escape. Helicopters from the Japanese Coast Guard vessel then dropped commandos aboard the ship in a search and seizure exercise. The DPRK predictably criticized these exercises but singled out Japan in particular with its rhetorical salvos. By the end of this quarter, Pyongyang claimed that Japan was now “banned” from the six-party nuclear talks started in Beijing in August.

Japan’s central role in these PSI exercises, despite its stated ambivalence for interdiction and significant domestic legal obstacles to doing so (e.g., the Japanese coast guard cannot board ships that do not fly Japanese flags, for the purpose of the exercises, the suspect vessel was tagged as a Japanese ship), attests not only to the poor state of Japan-DPRK relations, but also the degree to which Japan is willing to pursue sanctions against North Korea. Nowhere was this more apparent than toward the end of this quarter when Japanese newspaper reports had the government speaking openly about the type of sanctions it would pursue in the event of a DPRK nuclear test: 1) banning port calls by DPRK ships; 2) suspending financial remittances to the DPRK through Japanese financial institutions; 3) support a UN Security Council resolution for wider economic sanctions.

Japan’s Han (unredeemed resentment) on the Korean Peninsula

Japan’s resoluteness stems not only from the continued nuclear and missile threats posed by the DPRK, but a deep anger that exists within the Japanese public and government over the abduction issue. As this column has alluded to in the past, Kim Jong-il’s decision in September 2002 to admit to several cases of Japanese abductions did little to

alleviate the political obstacle this issue posed to normalization talks. Instead, it sparked widespread anger in Japan that has still not yet abated. This anger is rooted in the fact that some of these abductees died while in North Korea, and that the children of the returned abductees still remain in the North.

But the anger is also a form of Japanese self-flagellation. For decades, Japanese society dismissed claims by its own citizens about such kidnappings, basically relegating these people to the Western equivalent of “I was kidnapped by Martians” stories that adorn the covers of periodicals at the checkout stands of grocery stores. The North Korean leader’s public admission in this sense gave rise to shame and anger among many Japanese. The point is that this multi-tiered anger will continue to be vented against North Korea. Even if Pyongyang were to return the remaining children of the abductees (as they had implied in the runup to the six-party Beijing talks), this would not in my estimation end the anger as Japanese would then want answers to the hundreds of other suspect cases of abduction. The public mood is so unforgiving that at 55th anniversary DPRK celebrations at the pro-DPRK Chosen Soren headquarters in Japan, no Japanese government officials were present. As James Brooke of *The New York Times* reported, “in the past, power brokers from the governing Liberal Democratic Party would sweep into founding day banquets. But tonight, not even congressional representatives from the Communist Party of Japan dared be seen at a DPRK event.” In this sense, the abduction issue has become Japan’s unrequited resentment (or “han” in Korean) vis-à-vis the Korean Peninsula.

Japan-ROK Relations

Relative quiet in Seoul-Tokyo relations this quarter. Much of the activity between these two was dominated by three-way coordination with the United States in dealing with North Korea. In a nod to a younger generation of more confident South Koreans, the Seoul government lifted final import barriers against Japanese pop culture, music, and video games. While this was long overdue, it did show how confident the ROK has become with regard to its own pop culture (i.e., the Korean Wave) which has become the rave throughout Asia.

The other quiet but significant area of cooperation took place not in Seoul or Tokyo, but in Cancun, Mexico. On the sidelines of the World Trade Organization (WTO) meetings in Cancun, Trade and Industry Minister Takeo Hiranuma and ROK Trade Minister Hwang Doo Yun agreed that their two governments held similar views on a range of critical issues being discussed at the global gathering. The two countries wanted forestry and marine products to be exempted from proposed tariff cuts. They wanted to proceed with discussions on agriculture, market access to nonagricultural products, and the “Singapore” issues (i.e., trade facilitation, investment rules, transparency in government procurement, and competition policy). This cooperation in such global economic fora is

symptomatic of the deeper cleavages between the developed and developing world more than it is something explicit to Japan-South Korea bilateral relations.

Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group

The quarter saw active trilateral consultations among Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington on North Korea. TCOG meetings in mid-August provided opportunities for the three allies to coordinate strategies in advance of the six-party nuclear talks with North Korea in Beijing. These consultations helped minimize gaps in the three countries' positions during the Beijing meetings (despite the fact that the South Korean delegation chose not to stay in the same hotel as the U.S. and Japanese delegations). Following the six-party talks in Beijing, a TCOG meeting in Tokyo at the end of September focused in particular on exploring the format of an international inspection regime in North Korea that might include collaborative efforts between the three allies and the International Atomic Energy Agency. The three parties, led by Mitoji Yabunaka, head of the Japanese foreign ministry's Asian and Oceanian affairs bureau, the ROK Deputy Foreign Minister Lee Soo-Hyuck, and James Kelly, U.S. assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, also discussed the outlook for a second round of six-party talks as well as possible different formulae for security assurances to the North. These discussions did not take place with some apparent breakthrough anticipated in DPRK attitudes on stepping back from its nuclear programs, rather they constituted preparatory discussions in the eventuality (however remote) of such a move by Pyongyang.

The six-party meetings in late-August in Beijing offered another opportunity for Japan and the DPRK to exchange demarches, both of which remained basically unchanged from previous discussions. Following closely to the U.S. line, in Japan's opening statement at the meeting, Yabunaka Mitoji, the Foreign Ministry's director general of Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau, reiterated that economic and energy assistance would be forthcoming to the DPRK if it first took conciliatory steps on the nuclear and missile threat and on the abductions issue. The Japanese held a bilateral session with the North Koreans outside of the plenary sessions, and in these meetings reportedly placed strong emphasis on North Korean concessions on the abductions issue as a critical indicator of Pyongyang's good faith in resolving tensions with Tokyo. The North Koreans responded with little that could be considered positive, instead arguing that the Japanese had reneged on promises to return the five abductees who were allowed to visit Japan. Anger in Japan in response to this outcome on the abductions issue prompted numerous responses from public officials in Japan. Most notably, Tokyo Gov. Ishihara Shintaro called on the government to begin implementing economic sanctions against the DPRK to compel the regime to become more responsive in resolving the abductions issue.

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Chronology of Japan-South Korea Relations July-September 2003

July 2, 2003: U.S., Japanese, and South Korean officials meet for informal talks on the DPRK and efforts to end the stalemate over its nuclear weapons programs.

July 8, 2003: Japan, the ROK, and the U.S. agree in trilateral informal talks to halt the construction of light-water reactors in the DPRK if the DPRK fails to drop its nuclear ambitions.

July 14, 2003: The *Mainichi* newspaper reports that Japan-DPRK relations remain deadlocked despite contacts in mid-June aimed by Japan at pushing for multilateral talks to resolve both the nuclear and abductee issues, while the DPRK insisted on one-on-one talks with the U.S. first.

July 15, 2003: Japan and the U.S. agreed to tighten measures to crack down on the DPRK's drug smuggling, missile-related trade, currency counterfeiting, and other illegal activities.

July 16, 2003: DPRK drops its opposition to multilateral talks on its nuclear weapons program if the U.S. guarantees not to undermine the Kim Jong-il government.

July 22, 2003: PRC and the ROK protest against remarks by a senior Japanese politician playing down the Nanjing Massacre and Japan's annexation of the Korean Peninsula.

July 31, 2003: Russia expresses the DPRK's support for "six-sided talks" on resolving the complex situation on the Korean Peninsula.

July 31, 2003: Ten people believed to be DPRK asylum seekers take refuge at the Japanese embassy in Bangkok

Aug. 4, 2003: U.S. and Japan consider forming a nuclear inspection team for the DPRK that comprises weapons experts from the two countries, as well as the PRC, the ROK and Russia.

Aug. 4, 2003: DPRK intimates an interest in allowing families of returned abductees to visit Japan.

Aug. 1, 2003: Japan plans to raise the abduction of its citizens by the DPRK at six-way talks to be held in Beijing on the crisis over Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions.

Aug. 12, 2003: Japanese report says worrying about the threat from the DPRK's nuclear weapons and missile programs, Japan may seek an anti-missile system in place within three years.

Aug. 13-14, 2003: TCOG meeting in Washington – U.S., ROK, and Japanese officials final coordination prior to six-party nuclear talks with the DPRK in Beijing.

Aug. 16, 2003: Korea International Trade Association reports that Japan-DPRK bilateral trade has dropped sharply in the first half of 2003 as bilateral relations have suffered because of the abductee and nuclear issues.

Aug. 18, 2003: DPRK says that Japanese insistence on raising the abduction issue could lead to a scuttling of the upcoming six-party talks in Beijing.

Aug. 19, 2003: Japanese and German leaders reaffirm their commitment to peacefully address Pyongyang's nuclear arms program, with Berlin expressing support for Tokyo's efforts to resolve DPRK's past abductions of Japanese.

Aug. 19, 2003: *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* reports that Pyongyang demands Tokyo pay ¥1 billion (\$8.44 million) for the return of each abductees' child to their families now residing in Japan.

Aug. 20, 2003: *Tokyo Shimbun* reports that the DPRK offers to return the children of the five Japanese abductees in exchange for food aid from Tokyo and a commitment to close the abduction issue between the two countries.

Aug. 22, 2003: Japanese newspapers report that the Defense Agency will make a budget request of \$1.19 billion for the 2004 fiscal year in large part to introduce U.S. missile defense systems to defend Japan against the DPRK missile threat.

Aug. 24, 2003: DPRK *Mangyongbong-92* ferry makes first port call in Niigata, Japan in seven months.

Aug. 23-25, 2003: Japan and South Korea participate in naval military exercises hosted by Russia off the Russian Pacific Coast.

Aug. 27-29, 2003: Six-nation talks over the DPRK's nuclear weapons in Beijing.

Sept. 4, 2003: Japan's FM Kawaguchi Yoriko announces that Japan will seek bilateral talks with DPRK on the abduction issue, even outside the six-nation framework to resolve the nuclear problem.

Sept. 4, 2003: *Mangyongbong-92* arrives in port at Niigata and is met by anti-DPRK protestors.

Sept. 5, 2003: *Mangyongbong-92* is cleared to depart from Niigata, returning to North Korea after inspection of cargo and meeting safety requirements.

Sept. 8, 2003: Chosen Soren in Japan hold celebrations of 55th anniversary of DPRK. No Japanese government officials are present in a departure from past practice.

Sept. 11, 2003: Tokyo Gov. Shintaro Ishihara in a speech in Nagoya criticizes Deputy Foreign Minister Hitoshi Tanaka for appeasing North Korea.

Sept. 11, 2003: On the sidelines of the WTO conference in Cancun, Japanese Economy, Trade and Industry Minister Takeo Hiranuma and ROK Trade Minister Hwang Doo Yun agree that their governments hold similar views on a range of issues being discussed at the meeting.

Sept. 13-14, 2003: Proliferation Security Initiative exercises take place in the Coral Sea involving the U.S., France, Australia, and Japan and seven other nations as observers.

Sept. 15, 2003: Japanese newspapers report that the Japanese Defense Agency is interested in incorporating into missile defense plans a new radar technology with improved detection capabilities for the DPRK's Nodong ballistic missiles.

Sept. 15, 2003: DPRK *Korean Central News Agency* (KCNA) criticizes the maritime exercises, warning that Pyongyang would "further increase its nuclear deterrent force."

Sept. 15, 2003: *Yomiuri Shimbun* reports that the Japanese government is considering a range of economic sanctions if the DPRK undertakes a nuclear test.

Sept. 16, 2003: South Korea announces the lifting of import barriers for Japanese movies, pop songs, and video games from 2004.

Sept. 17, 2003: One year anniversary of the Koizumi-Kim summit in Pyongyang

Sept. 23, 2003: FM Kawaguchi in speech before the UN General Assembly calls on the DPRK to abandon its nuclear weapons program and resolve the abduction issue before Tokyo could normalize relations with Pyongyang.

Sept. 26, 2003: DPRK's *Rodong Sinmun* commentary warns that Pyongyang declaration between Kim and Koizumi last year is almost meaningless and that the two countries are inching toward war.

Sept. 29, 2003: TCOG meeting in Tokyo.