

Japan-Korea Relations: **Nuclear Sea of Fire**

Victor Cha
Georgetown University

Tokyo joined the ranks of cities (including Los Angeles and Seoul) bestowed with the dubious distinction of being threatened with being turned into a nuclear sea of fire by the DPRK. This rhetoric, often chalked up to harmless bluster, reflected real tension this quarter over a possible DPRK missile test and continued stalemates on the abductee dispute. Tokyo's relations with Seoul were capped this quarter by a summit. Good relations at the highest levels, however, still could not overcome history issues and potentially tectonic shifts in the character of relations.

Japan-North Korea: Missile worries

The *Rodong Shinmun* newspaper this quarter threatened to nuke Japan if Pyongyang comes under attack from the United States. "Par for the course" might be the response of many who have become jaded by the DPRK's bluster. But the "sea of fire" threat this quarter registered concerns because of speculation about a North Korean missile test. The Sept. 27 issue of *Chosun Ilbo* and the Sept. 23 issue of *Yomiuri Shimbun* reported heightened activity at 10 North Korean missile bases on the east coast of the Peninsula. According to these press reports, activities included the movement of vehicles, soldiers, engineers, and what appeared to be vehicles carrying liquid fuel. Concerns about a *Rodong* missile test prompted the Japan Defense Agency to dispatch two destroyers and a EP-3 reconnaissance plane to the Sea of Japan to monitor activities. U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell stated that such a test would have grave consequences. Deputy Chief for Asian affairs in Japan's Foreign Ministry Saiki Akitaka also warned the North against provocative actions. Thankfully, no such test occurred by the end of this quarter, but one cannot discount the significance of these events. Each outburst of DPRK bluster and threats plants the seed of fundamental change in Japan's defense posture and attitudes toward security. Long after the DPRK threat is gone, what will remain is a Japan much less hesitant to shed its postwar pacifist identity.

The most likely response by Japan to the North's continued stroll down the nuclear path is not a nuclear Japan as many surmise. Instead, it would likely be the creation of a highly accurate missile deterrent (in addition to robust missile defenses). This quarter indeed saw news of the JDA contemplating a revised National Defense Program Outline this year that would include offensive missiles – including precision-guided munitions, anti-ship missiles, *Tomahawk* cruise missiles, and aircraft carriers. Although these plans

are tentative, the legacy that North Korea leaves for the region is likely to be a “normal” Japan in security terms.

Abductees

The high-profile reunion of alleged U.S. Army defector Charles Robert Jenkins with his family in Indonesia and Japan (where he would ultimately face a military trial following medical treatment) overshadowed a general lack of progress on the abductee issue during the quarter. Japan and the DPRK held working-level meetings in Beijing in August that aimed to take up the pledge made by Kim Jong-il to Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro in their May 2004 summit to reinvestigate and provide more details about the 10 abductee cases. Japan sweetened the incentives for North Korea to make good on the Dear Leader’s promise by donating \$5 million to the UNICEF world appeal for North Korea (the largest donation thus far this year). But the North failed to make good on its promise. In a second set of talks in September, DPRK officials retracted a previous claim that abductee Megumi Yokota committed suicide in 1993, but beyond this provided little additional information. Japanese government spokesmen Hosoda Hiroyuki concluded wryly that the only concrete result of the talks was that there was no progress at all.

Japan-ROK relations: no-necktie summit

The highlight of the quarter in Seoul-Tokyo relations was the summit between ROK President Roh Moo-hyun and Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi on Jeju island in July 2004. The “no necktie” casual nature of the meeting was meant to convey an intimacy in bilateral relations that sought to build on the last meeting between the two leaders in June 2003 in Tokyo. The joint statement released at the end of the meetings stated both sides’ intention to accelerate bilateral consultations, to expand economic cooperation with North Korea if Pyongyang resolves the nuclear dispute, and to seek normalization of relations by Japan if the abductee and nuclear issues are addressed. Perhaps most important, the two leaders agreed to regularize at least two summit meetings annually between the two countries.

These positive measures at the highest levels, however, contrast with an uneasiness between Seoul and Tokyo over a number of issues that emerged during the quarter. First, South Korea offered a less-than-enthusiastic response to Japan’s bid for a permanent UN Security Council seat. Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon stated that the ROK supported the augmentation of the number of seats for nonpermanent Security Council members, but opposed the expansion of permanent member seats. This official position allowed Seoul to skirt a direct statement opposing Japan’s bid.

Second, history textbooks came back to haunt relations this quarter. South Korea protested the adoption of a controversial nationalist textbook by a secondary school in Japan. The disputed history text published by Fuso Publishing – which offers a less critical interpretation of Japan’s wartime activities – was originally approved for use in 2001 by the Education Ministry for Japanese schools. The Tokyo Metropolitan Government’s education board approved in August the use of the text in a junior high

school in Taito ward (about 160 students) from April 2005 despite protests by Korean resident associations in Japan.

Third, President Roh called for a parliamentary commission to review the history of Korean collaborators during Japan's 36-year occupation from 1910 to 1945. The purpose of this "truth commission" would be to identify Koreans whose families might have benefited from the occupation period. The noble principles behind such an effort, however, were all but obfuscated by the naked political motives driving it. Seeking in particular to target Park Keun-hye, the head of the conservative opposition Grand National Party and daughter of former authoritarian, pro-Japanese ruler Park Chung-hee, the proponents of the truth commission did more damage to themselves than the opposition as the ruling party leader was forced to resign after his father was found to have been a colonial policeman. (Koreans were often recruited as colonial police because of their language and familiarity with the country; Korean colonial police were often more brutal than Japanese colonial police and were one of the most despised elements of the occupation.) These actions were, of course, taken without any regard for how they might affect Japan-ROK bilateral relations.

Finally, the quarter saw Japanese public apprehension at revelations regarding South Korean nuclear experiments in the 1980s and 2000. Despite ROK Deputy Foreign Minister Lee Soo-hyuck's efforts to quell Japanese concerns during a trip to Tokyo in September, the major Japanese press granted the ROK little slack. *Asahi Shimbun* considered the South's actions a major blow to the nonproliferation regime. *Yomiuri Shimbun* expressed concerns that South Korea's noncompliance only made the prospects of eliciting DPRK cooperation more remote.

A tectonic shift?

How do we explain this apparent gap between summit pleasantries and less-than-smooth relations on the ground? Some of the problems undeniably derive from the specific events rather than being representative of a larger trend. It would be strange, for example, if the extraordinary nuclear revelations in South Korea did not cause a problem in relations. Here, it would appear to be in Seoul's interests to welcome with enthusiasm the highest levels of verification requested by international agencies. The reasons for this are three: 1) if the experiments are indeed rogue acts by scientists without the express approval of the government, then it is in Seoul's interest to make this eminently clear to the entire world by allowing the highest levels of verification as deemed necessary; 2) taking the cooperative path would also maintain South Korea's reputation as an open democracy that is a staunch supporter of the nonproliferation regime; and 3) most important, this would create a clear and consistent precedent for verification that would then be applied equally to North Korea.

Nevertheless, the lack of concern for relations with Tokyo vis-à-vis South Korea's actions regarding the UN Security Council and the "truth commission" issues is puzzling. This could represent a new stage in Seoul-Tokyo relations where democratic maturation has unintended effects. In the past, one of the key obstacles to bilateral cooperation was

the absence of democracy in South Korea. Bilateral relations between Seoul and Tokyo during the days of Park Chung-hee, for example, were conducted on a personal level without transparency and without any institutions. This detracted from the public legitimacy of relations. Democratization and democratic consolidation in South Korea in the late-1980s and 1990s were accompanied by the proliferation of institutions (e.g., foreign minister bilaterals, defense minister bilaterals, summits, parliamentary exchanges, etc.) that gave the bilateral relationship greater transparency and legitimacy.

But a funny thing may have happened along this liberal-democracy path. Just as the institutions of dialogue have become standardized and ubiquitous – representative of that between two mature democracies – the people who filter through these institutions have changed dramatically. In particular, the political gains of the 3-8-6 generation in the April 2004 National Assembly elections in Korea now present bilateral relations with a new cast of characters with little familiarity with Japan. According to *Asahi Shimbun* (July 6, 2004), prior to the 2004 National Assembly elections, nearly two-thirds of standing assemblymen (187) participated in the Japan-ROK Parliamentarian Friendship League. The ascendance of the Uri party however has left only 62 members with ties to the league. In addition, the retirement of Kim Jong-pil, former prime minister and head of the United Liberal Democratic Party in South Korea, constitutes a watershed in the shift from the old era of Japan-ROK relations to a new one. Ruling Uri party members when polled about foreign policy priorities responded with overwhelming enthusiasm about the focus on China (63 percent), and with decidedly less enthusiasm for the U.S. (26 percent). What about Japan? Two percent.

The significance of this shift is difficult to calculate. If it were to lead to a significant decline in Japan-ROK bilateral relations, this would run contrary to widely accepted “democratic peace” arguments in international relations. It is difficult to imagine that with foreign policy experience and a rational calculation of South Korean interests along the axes of political values, security needs, and economic transparency, that these young lawmakers will not assign Japan a higher priority. Nevertheless, there is no denying that democratic consolidation has introduced a new dynamic in bilateral relations between Seoul and Tokyo.

Chronology of Japan-Korea Relations July-September 2004

July 15, 2004: DPRK ferry *Mangyongbong-92* leaves Niigata port for DPRK with 220 passengers and 80 tons of cargo.

July 16, 2004: *Chosun Ilbo* reports that Japanese and South Korean governments are considering a proposal to regularize at least two summits per year.

July 19, 2004: Prime Minister Koizumi says that he will request that the U.S. give special consideration to the desertion case of Charles Robert Jenkins, now reunited with his family in Japan.

July 22, 2004: Koizumi-Roh one-day summit in Jeju, South Korea. The two leaders release statements calling for Seoul-Tokyo cooperation in resolving the nuclear dispute with North Korea.

July 26, 2004: *Tonga Ilbo* reports that in March 2004 a Japanese *EP-3* reconnaissance plane was buzzed by a DPRK MIG fighter jet off the coast of the Korean Peninsula.

Aug 7, 2004: DPRK *Korea Central News Agency* criticizes Japan for its announced hosting of PSI exercises to take place in October.

Aug. 10, 2004: Japan Vice Foreign Minister Aisawa Ichiro meets with Libyan counterpart, Mohamed Siala, asking for cooperation and information about North Korea's missile program.

Aug. 12, 2004: Japan-DPRK talks in Beijing on abductee issue make no progress. At issue is Japan's demands for more details on the fate of the 10 confirmed abduction cases.

Aug. 12, 2004: Japan donates \$5 million to UNICEF world appeal for DPRK. This is the largest amount given by a government to the appeal.

Aug. 16, 2004: DPRK defector Hwang Jang-yop accepts invitation to speak before the Japanese Diet in mid-September (at the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee).

Aug. 23, 2004: Suit filed by 111 Koreans suffering from leprosy in Tokyo District Court demanding compensation for their imposed isolation and labor conscription during the Japanese occupation.

Aug. 25, 2004: ROK President Roh states that recognition of the "buried history" of South Korean patriots who opposed the Japanese occupation will be on his administration's agenda for resolution.

Aug. 26, 2004: Controversial nationalist history textbook is adopted for use in public secondary school in Japan.

Sept. 1, 2004: ROK Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon lodges protest with regard to Japanese history textbooks inaccurately portraying history of occupation and wartime period under Japanese rule.

Sept. 9, 2004: Japanese government spokesman Hosoda Hiroyuki states that Japan finds South Korea's covert plutonium extraction activities "inappropriate" and says the government will await an explanation from Seoul.

Sept. 17, 2004: Japanese government spokesman Hosoda states that revelations with regard to the ROK's fissile material experiments should not be utilized by the DPRK as an excuse for avoiding a fourth round of six-party talks.

Sept. 17, 2004: *Yomiuri Shimbun* reports that Japan dispatched MSDF to the Sea of Japan, including *Aegis*-class destroyer and EP-3 reconnaissance planes to monitor movements associated with a possible DPRK missile test.

Sept. 21-23, 2004: Deputy Foreign Minister Lee Soo-hyuck meets counterpart Yabunaka Mitoji in Japan. Discussions include DPRK nuclear issues and revelations regarding secret nuclear experiments in the ROK.

Sept. 22, 2004: At UN General Assembly meetings in New York, Koizumi relays message to North Korean representatives of Japan's hopes for a peaceful resolution to the nuclear issue and speedy investigations on the abductions issues.

Sept. 23, 2004: DPRK *Rodong Shinmun* states that DPRK would turn Japan into a "nuclear sea of fire" if the United States undertook a preemptive attack on the DPRK.

Sept. 25, 2004: Japanese news agencies report Kim Jong-nam (son of Kim Jong-il) spotted in international arrivals terminal in Beijing.

Sept. 25-26, 2004: Japan-DPRK negotiations in Beijing. Japan presses abduction and missile issues.

Sept. 26, 2004: Japanese press reports increased North Korean military activities at 10 missile bases. Concerns about a possible *Rodong* missile test raised.

Sept. 27, 2004: Koizumi Cabinet reshuffle. Kawaguchi Yoriko replaced as foreign minister by former Education Minister Machimura Nobutaka. Kawaguchi and Yamasaki Taku retained as special advisors to the prime minister.

Sept. 27, 2004: Japan *RadioPress* quotes DPRK News agency saying that U.S. plans to deploy a missile defense system on ships in the Sea of Japan is an attempt to "isolate and crush" the DPRK.

Sept. 29, 2004: North Korean criticizes Japan for measures designed to protect nuclear and other energy facilities from DPRK infiltration or sabotage.