

Japan-Korea Relations: Quicksand

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The quarter's events were obfuscated by the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. Seoul and Tokyo responded to the horrific events with statements of support for America's anti-terrorism campaign. On the bilateral fronts, Japan-South Korea relations continued their downward spiral from last quarter because of history-related disputes with little hope of resolution in sight. Japan-North Korea relations remain dead in the water. Is there any good news? Not really. But being the perpetual optimist, this column notes some interesting developments that shed light on an otherwise gloomy quarter.

Sept. 11 through the Japan-Korea Lens

Japan and South Korea responded promptly to the terrorist attacks in the United States with statements of material and moral support for America's international campaign against terrorism. South Korean President Kim Dae-jung made such commitments in the context of the mutual defense treaty (Sept. 17) and promised to review promptly any U.S. calls for specific types of support. Japan went one step further, issuing a 7-point statement (Sept. 14) that included the provision of emergency aid to Pakistan and the dispatching of Self-Defense Forces (SDF) and intelligence vessels to support U.S. forces in the Indian Ocean. The meaningfulness of these measures for the U.S.-Japan alliance is dealt with elsewhere in this volume, but from the Japan-Korea perspective, the reactions in Seoul and Pyongyang again illustrate Tokyo's maddening leadership dilemma. On the one hand, Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's initiative represented a desire to avoid the fiasco of the Gulf War and respond rapidly and assertively to this international crisis in a manner commensurate with Japan's overall capabilities and visions as a responsible international leader. On the other hand, any actions that hint modestly at changes in Japan's traditional postwar security paradigm meet with deep regional suspicions. The DPRK's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) supported an international campaign against terrorism, but flat-out opposed Japanese participation and covert ambitions to become a military power. ROK officials were less animated than their Northern brethren yet could not resist noting their interest in monitoring the contents of the bill that would go to the Diet.

Japan-South Korea: All This and Fish Too

Fueling the parochial reactions to Koizumi's anti-terrorism initiatives was of course the continuing history row between Seoul and Tokyo. Like quicksand, the more pressure put on relations by historically contentious Japanese acts, the more deeply mired the two governments became. Moreover, official attempts to get out of this funk only resulted in the two sides sinking even deeper. All of the markers laid out in last quarter's analysis of poor relations [see "Questions, Questions, and More Questions," *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 3. No. 2] were unceremoniously met: in response to the textbook controversy (and later Koizumi's Aug. 13 visit to Yasukuni Shrine), Seoul 1) filed formal diplomatic protests; 2) froze market liberalization measures for Japanese music and culture; 3) passed National Assembly resolutions to comprehensively review ties with Japan; 4) canceled over 100 scheduled sports/culture/educational friendship exchanges; and 5) canceled scheduled security exchanges. The last of these is perhaps the most damaging. The visit by Gen. Cho Young-gil, chairman of the ROK joint chiefs of staff, to the Japan Defense Agency (JDA) and the scheduled port call by Maritime Self-Defense Forces (MSDF) vessels at Incheon in September were important symbols not only of the budding post-Cold War bilateral security relationship, but also emblematic of a "new Japan-Korea identity" in which cooler heads would prevail when it came to political-military cooperation between these two U.S. allies.

If things were not bad enough, the quarter also saw a Japanese fishing dispute with South Korea and Russia. At the center of the problem was a Russia-ROK fee agreement (effective July 15) allowing South Korea saury fishing boats to operate in waters off Russian-held islands near Hokkaido that are claimed by Japan. Tokyo lodged formal protests with Seoul and Moscow (Aug. 2) and the issue appeared to near resolution (Sept. 20) by the end of the quarter but not without a maritime accident involving a Japanese patrol boat and Korean fishing trawler in Japanese waters (Sept. 26).

What is most worrying about the current state of affairs is that the usual behind-the-scenes attempts to get relations back on track have been unusually unsuccessful. For example, a high-level delegation of Japanese ruling party officials carrying a personal letter from Koizumi to Kim Dae-jung (July 8) were denied a meeting with the South Korean president because of a "schedule conflict." The South Koreans instead responded with a set of preconditions for a normal resumption of relations (Aug. 20). Efforts later in the quarter by Japanese Foreign Ministry officials to set up a bilateral summit were all declined. Even initiatives to set up sideline meetings between the two leaders at third-party events (e.g., the UN Special Session on Children in September) were unsuccessful. Such initiatives only highlighted how bad relations had become. As one Japanese Foreign Ministry official described it, usually beneath the surface of these sorts of disputes is frenetic diplomatic activity to restore relations. This time, officials are at a loss about what to do next.

Japan-DPRK Relations: Dead in the Water

Japan-DPRK relations have yet to emerge from the deadlock in normalization talks reached in the last quarter of 2000 [see “Ending 2000 with a Whimper, not a Bang,” *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 2 No. 4]. In addition, not only did Pyongyang find new issues to protest with Japan (i.e., Japan’s anti-terrorism initiative), but also unleashed scathing criticisms of Japan’s space launch vehicle program this quarter. The state-run KCNA criticized Japan’s first successful test of its H2-A rocket (Aug. 29) as destabilizing to the region’s peace and security; in addition, it threatened to end its own self-imposed moratorium on missile test launches (Sept. 11). The likelihood of North Korea carrying through on the latter threat is low (given that this moratorium is keyed more to U.S.-DPRK relations than Japan-DPRK), nevertheless, it’s another issue for this relationship to work through.

Any Good News?

Those who follow this column know that it cannot resist the temptation to find something positive in an otherwise gloomy quarter. For the better (albeit in minuscule increments), there were some positive developments. A Japanese Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) fact-finding delegation returned from the DPRK (Sept. 22) reporting that it discovered no major problems with the integrity of distribution and management system for rice donated to Pyongyang by Tokyo. Skeptics of the DPRK might find this finding a bit of a stretch, but the delegation’s report was based on inspections of at least 24 food distribution centers, elementary schools, and homes in seven districts. It offers one step forward in surmounting domestic political obstacles in Japan created by the lack of transparency in rice aid shipments, which Tokyo hopes to use as engagement tools.

On the Seoul-Tokyo front, while the banner headlines on history screamed about textbooks and Yasukuni, the quarter saw two less-publicized but noteworthy developments. First, a Kyoto district court ruled against the government of Japan in a case involving Korean conscripted laborers killed or injured by an explosion while aboard a Japanese vessel (Ukushima Maru) shortly after World War II (case filed in 1992). The court ruled that the Japanese government was negligent in the safe transport of the passengers and ordered monetary compensation for 15 Koreans (and relatives) confirmed to have been on the vessel (the plaintiff’s demand for an official apology was not upheld by the court). Although this result did not meet the expectations of the plaintiffs, legal experts find it an important precedent for a host of other court cases filed against the Japanese government involving compensation for conscripted laborers. Second, Tokyo appears ready to act on another historical issue with Korea: atomic bomb survivors. Japan’s Minister of Health, Labor, and Welfare Sakaguchi Chikara was one of the few (indeed first) Cabinet officials to visit Seoul after Koizumi’s shrine visit and pledged that Japan would reconsider its laws governing atomic bomb survivors, offer Korea’s 2,200 survivors medical aid, and invite a South Korean representative to join the ministry’s Atomic Bomb Victims Relief Law review panel.

On political-military issues, Seoul arguably could have been accused of a moment of cooperation with its conspicuous silence (versus Pyongyang’s diatribes) with regard to Japan’s H-2 rocket launch. Such an event undoubtedly cast hope on South Korea’s own

pipedream of a national space program. The institution of the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) continued to be upheld by the three allies this quarter, with meetings in Tokyo (Sept. 6). As in past meetings, the joint statement emphasized the importance of trilateral coordination of policy toward North Korea – not distinctive in its own right, but an important reminder of where the Seoul-Tokyo relationship should be, rather than where it is today.

Chronology of Japan - Korea Relations July-September 2001¹

July 2, 2001: Insisting decision to make changes to controversial texts is “voluntary” and not response to ROK requests, Japan’s Fusso Publishing Inc. notifies Education Ministry of plan to rewrite text in nine parts.

July 2, 2001: Japan’s FM Tanaka sends second letter to Russian counterpart, Igor Ivanov, urging Moscow to retract its decision allowing South Korean vessels to fish in waters around Russian-held islands off Hokkaido (first letter sent June 19).

July 8, 2001: ROK President Kim Dae-jung refuses to meet with high-level Japanese ruling party delegation carrying a letter from PM Koizumi asking to meet and for understanding on the textbook issue.

July 9, 2001: Riot police battle demonstrators protesting at Japanese Embassy in Seoul against Tokyo’s refusal to change history textbooks.

July 9, 2001: High-ranking officials of Japan’s ruling coalition meet with FM Han Seung-soo to propose joint history research and teacher exchanges to improve strained ties between the countries. Similar proposals will be made to China.

July 12, 2001: ROK announces sanctions against Japan over textbook controversy, including postponing high-level military exchanges, postponing liberalization measures to open ROK markets to Japanese cultural imports, and canceling over 100 sports and private-level exchange programs.

July 18, 2001: South Korea’s National Assembly unanimously passes resolution calling on government to make comprehensive review of ties with Japan, banning Japanese associated with textbooks from entering ROK, urging blockage of Japan’s efforts to gain permanent UN Security Council seat.

July 20, 2001: South Korea officially demands that Japan remove names of Koreans who died in World War II from Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo. Japanese government to deliver request to shrine.

1. Chronology compiled by research assistant Sandra Leavitt.

July 23, 2001: Japan, ROK, and U.S. send high-level representatives to ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meetings in Hanoi; bilateral meetings between ROK-Japan.

July 25, 2001: Preparatory meeting held for upcoming Japan-South Korea governors' summit.

July 26, 2001: Japan's Nippon Steel Corp. and South Korea's Pohang Iron & Steel Co. (POSCO) announce plans to cooperate on procurement of raw materials, including iron ore.

Aug. 1, 2001: ROK fishing boats start fishing in waters around Russian-held islands claimed by Japan. Japan invalidates license for the ROK saury boats to operate in the region.

Aug. 2, 2001: Japan's Senior Vice FM Uetake Shigeo lodges formal protest with Moscow and Seoul over fishing waters dispute.

Aug. 5, 2001: Memorial service for Koreans killed by atomic bombing of Hiroshima held in Peace Memorial Park.

Aug. 7, 2001: Tokyo Metropolitan Board of Education votes to use controversial history textbook at three public schools for disabled children, first time book approved for public schools.

Aug. 13, 2001: PM Koizumi visits Yasukuni Shrine, two days before 56th anniversary of Japan's surrender in WWII.

Aug. 14, 2001: ROK Vice FM Choi Sung-hong lodges formal protest over visit to Yasukuni Shrine by PM Koizumi.

Aug. 15, 2001: On Liberation Day in ROK, President Kim Dae-jung reiterates in televised speech country's serious concern over Koizumi's visit to Yasukuni Shrine.

Aug. 20, 2001: FM Han in National Assembly sets out preconditions for ROK and Japan to hold bilateral summit talks.

Aug. 20, 2001: PM Koizumi lodges protest with Russian President Putin for granting fishing rights to other countries, including South Korea, in waters around disputed islands off Hokkaido.

Aug. 23, 2001: Kyoto District Court rules out official apology but orders government of Japan to pay \$375,000 to 15 South Korean survivors from 1945 ship explosion that killed 524 Korean forced laborers.

Aug. 28, 2001: Koizumi sends letter to Kim, expressing regret over Yasukuni Shrine controversy and offering to visit Seoul for summit.

Aug. 29, 2001: Japan successfully launches its first H2-A rocket (space launch vehicle designed for satellites).

Aug. 29, 2001: Japan's Minister of Health, Labor, and Welfare Sakaguchi Chikara arrives in South Korea, first Japanese Cabinet member to visit Seoul since Koizumi's visit to shrine.

Sept. 1, 2001: Japan's Health Minister Sakaguchi pledges that Japan will reconsider A-bomb law, offer Korea's 2,200 survivors medical aid, and invite South Korean representative to join ministry's Atomic Bomb Victims Relief Law review panel.

Sept. 6, 2001: TCOG meets in Tokyo.

Sept. 11, 2001: DPRK threatens to suspend missile test moratorium in response to Japan's Aug. 29 satellite launch vehicle test.

Sept. 11, 2001: Tokyo Gov. Ishihara Shintaro meets with U.S. Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and calls for U.S. political support if Tokyo takes a greater role defending territorial waters in the East China Sea and Sea of Japan, arguing that North Korean ships continue to invade Japan's waters.

Sept. 17, 2001: ROK and Japanese governments express support for U.S. anti-terrorism campaign in context of their mutual defense treaties with the U.S. (Japanese announcement is on Sept. 14).

Sept. 18, 2001: Five-person Japanese Diet delegation leaves for North Korea to inspect integrity of rice aid distribution.

Sept. 18, 2001: Forbes.com reports that Japanese Red Army terrorists have been traveling between DPRK and Middle East for past decade active in drug trafficking, small arms sales, and counterfeiting.

Sept. 20, 2001: Seoul National University history professor Shin Yong-ha reveals military document found in U.S. National Archives claiming agreement among Allied Powers in 1949 recognizes Tok-do islets are Korean territory.

Sept. 20, 2001: Russia and Japan agree to negotiate solution to fishing-rights/poaching conflicts in waters around Russian-held islands claimed by Japan. Affects earlier Russia-South Korea agreement.

Sept. 22, 2001: Japanese fact-finding mission to DPRK states it has no concern about the disposition and distribution of rice aid provided by Japan to the North.

Sept. 24, 2001: DPRK official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) criticizes Japan's proposed efforts to support U.S. anti-terrorist actions as veiled attempt to break out of Peace Constitution.

Sept. 25, 2001: White House announces postponement of President Bush's scheduled summits in China, South Korea, and Japan after the APEC Leaders' Meeting in Shanghai (Oct. 20).

Sept 26, 2001: Japan Fisheries Agency reports maritime accident between a Japanese patrol boat and ROK trawler fishing in Japanese waters.

Sept 28, 2001: DPRK's KCNA criticizes Japan for what it called a bid to develop nuclear missiles by stealth through SLV program.

