

Japan-Korea Relations: The Pre-Game Continues....

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The quarter was a relatively quiet one for Japan-ROK and Japan-DPRK relations. There is no denying important and requisite interim steps taken by Tokyo and Pyongyang in preliminary normalization talks. There is no denying modest but not immoderate steps by Seoul and Tokyo in cementing relations. Trilateral policy coordination with the United States also continued. But these developments are best seen as the “pre-game” for the next quarter when formal Japan-DPRK normalization talks commence, a high-level DPRK visit to Washington is imminent, a Japan-ROK summit is in the making, and a high-level inter-Korean meeting remains a possibility.

Japan-DPRK Relations: Pre-Game Analysis

Tokyo and Pyongyang undertook several requisite steps (noted in last quarter’s analysis “DPRK Dialogue: A Little Luck the Fourth Time Around?”) that enabled both sides to get closer to the start of official normalization dialogue. Japan’s decision to lift a three-year suspension on food aid to the DPRK and to provide 100,000 tons of rice through the World Food Program, while couched in the language of humanitarian food aid, met an important precondition for the North to start normalization talks. Pyongyang’s reciprocal commitment to look into the issue of abducted and/or missing Japanese, although far from a promise on which to bet the house, made it at least marginally easier domestically for the Obuchi government to start the talks. Both sides are engaging in a bit of pre-positioning in the run-up to the first formal round of talks starting in Pyongyang, April 4-8. Kojiro Takano, Japan's ambassador to KEDO and chief negotiator to the talks, and Foreign Minister Yohei Kono have stated in no uncertain terms the criticality of resolving the abduction issue, while DPRK counterparts have pressed the reparations issue as well as expressed outrage at any inclusion in the talks of curbs on its missile program.

The only certainty in this upcoming negotiation path is that it will be painfully protracted with deadlocks, walkouts, and suspensions (just ask the Americans). If the past is any indicator, North Korean intransigence correlates positively with the perceived importance of the negotiation, and clearly the DPRK has a great deal at stake in a potential normalization settlement with Japan. One positive factor for the Japanese is that the North approaches the negotiation marginally more practiced in diplomacy. In the past quarter alone, the North has hosted Australian foreign ministry delegations and agreed in principle to reestablish diplomatic relations (February 27-28). Pursuant to normalizing relations with Italy (January), DPRK premier Paek Nam-sun hosted the Italian foreign minister (March 28) and agreed to reciprocate the visit in the near future. The Pyongyang government sent a working-level delegation secretly to Canada (March 7) to explore areas of cooperative exchange, hosted a French delegation for similar purposes (February 1), and in April agreed to host for the first time in three years a British delegation on International Maritime Organization (IMO) issues and English language-teaching. Pyongyang has made overtures for diplomatic relations with South Africa and the Philippines (Senate president Blas Ople will visit in May), and will likely seek membership in

the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). It will attend the G-77 South Summit in Cuba in April, most likely bookended by trips to some South American capitals.

The sheer volume of diplomatic activity is unprecedented in recent years, perhaps not seen since the days of Kim Il-sung's relatively successful diplomatic initiatives with the non-aligned movement in the early 1970s. For more on North Korea's diplomatic offensive, see last quarter's commentary "North Korea: Making Up Lost Ground, Pyongyang Reaches Out." An ROK intelligence report (January) noted the larger trend, citing definitive increases of 134 and 222 overseas visits in 1998 and 1999 respectively by DPRK officials after a severe and sustained drop-off since Kim Il-sung's death (1994). Moreover, the level at which the DPRK is interacting externally has been steadily rising with individuals like Paek Nam-sun and Kim Yong-nam participating (the latter was the highest level DPRK official the Perry mission met with in June 1999; Kim is scheduled to attend the G-77 summit).

That Pyongyang's survival end game has taken a turn toward pragmatic diplomacy rather than isolation as the primary means is clear; what is debatable is the extent to which these new initiatives augur positively or negatively for Japan-DPRK talks. Those who support the latter view argue that the DPRK's new relationships give them leverage vis-a-vis Tokyo and make them even more difficult to negotiate with. Taking a page from the Kim Young-sam government's harder-line days, the prevailing *modus operandi* for these critics is that the best DPRK was an isolated one -- i.e., a successful negotiating strategy in relation to the North was to make all DPRK external contacts contingent on improvements in relations with the principal (in Kim Young-sam's days, Seoul, and in this case, Tokyo).

On the other hand, the recent diplomatic activity may indicate that the DPRK is now genuinely interested in seeking new external relations including Japan (which was not a foregone conclusion in earlier DPRK forays in the mid-1990s). In part, this is because the higher levels at which Pyongyang is interacting may indicate a good part of the internal struggles over grand strategy as well as the extensive ideological reorienting necessary to justify the new path may be near resolution. Determining which of these views is right is clearly a tough call, but if such an interpretation were correct, Tokyo would at least be starting formal talks in April with a DPRK somewhat different in its intentions than in the past.

A less difficult judgment call pertains to the effect of South Korean domestic politics on Japan-DPRK dialogue. Some judge that a poor outcome for the ruling government in the upcoming South Korean legislative elections (April) could galvanize hard core conservative elements and be interpreted as a mandate for scaling back the Sunshine Policy. This would throw out of kilter the delicate trilateral coordination dynamic of the Perry review and potentially worsen Seoul-Tokyo relations over once familiar arguments of DPRK "wedge strategies" (i.e., ROK bitterness at Pyongyang's ignoring the South while improving relations with the U.S. and Japan).

This is hardly likely for two reasons. The Sunshine Policy is likely to survive virtually any outcome to the national assembly elections, in large part because the policy benefits from its own success -- in other words, it is now politically legitimate in ROK domestic politics to advocate a non-confrontational, non-zero-sum policy with North Korea (this will be remembered as the most important accomplishment of the Kim government's Sunshine Policy historically). Second,

Tokyo has made it very clear that future tangible acts of cooperation with the North (read: direct bilateral food aid) will be contingent on improvements in inter-Korean relations. Thus, Seoul and Tokyo's ability to manage successfully their respective DPRK policies to the benefit of bilateral relations is actually overdetermined rather than contingent on the whims of domestic politics.

The Kim Dae-jung-Obuchi Era: Making History without Histrionics

On the Seoul-Tokyo front, bilateral relations sustained cooperative trends from the past quarter. Trilateral policy coordination on North Korea continued with meetings of the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) in February and March. On the security front, meetings between Chairman of Japan's Joint Staff Council Yuji Fujinawa and the ROK chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Cho Yung-kil committed to expanding bilateral military exchanges and other forms of security cooperation. These meetings only seem underwhelming to those without an understanding of the past. What were once unofficial, sporadic, and taboo meetings between high-level military officers in the 1960s and 1970s have now become official, regular, and institutionalized channels of bilateral security dialogue and cooperation. Moreover, as observers have noted, a key difference today is that when the two militaries talk about the need for closer ties as essential to regional stability (what has now become standard communiqué language in meetings of this nature), they really mean it!

Perhaps most significant in the longer-term were the quiet accomplishments in the past quarter on "low-politics" issues. The March 18-20 meeting of education ministers in Seoul, while short on accomplishments, was long on symbolism. Hirofumi Nakasone and his South Korean counterpart Moon Young-lin reached modest agreements on expanding student and cultural exchanges, but the significance was that the visit took place at all. Because of the history textbook controversy (which reached its apex as a diplomatic dispute ironically during Nakasone's father's premiership in the mid 1980s), no Japanese education minister has been able to pay an official visit to Seoul since 1965. Nakasone's visit is not a panacea for the history problem (for example, the textbook issue was deliberately side-stepped by both sides during the visit and ROK-requested revisions to textbook sections dealing with "comfort women" remain pending). Nevertheless, the visit represents another manifestation of the Kim Dae-jung-Obuchi commitment to take the relationship in new, positive directions.

The aggregate effect of small events like these and Seoul's decision to remove the import ban on Japanese products (last quarter) represent an incremental liquidation of the negative ideational base that has traditionally informed the relationship. At least on the Japanese side, this was manifest in national surveys released by the prime minister's office in January showing for the first time in eleven years a majority of respondents feeling closer to Korea than not. Slowly but surely, the Kim Dae-jung-Obuchi era is making (and re-making) history.

Outlook for the Next Quarter: Game Time

Projecting linearly from the course of events this past quarter, the next quarter promises to be a noisier one, for better or for worse. Most prominent among the events will be the formal start of Japan-DPRK normalization talks and a possible high-level DPRK visit to Washington. Should Pyongyang perceive the South's national assembly election results as not rendering the Kim government lame-duck status, an inter-Korean meeting of some form is not off the radar screen. Expect, at any rate, an ROK presidential visit to Japan as well as more high-level Japan-ROK military exchanges.

Chronology of Japan-Korea Relations January-March 2000

Jan. 5, 2000: ROK and Japanese government spokesmen applaud Italy's decision to normalize relations with North Korea.

Jan. 5, 2000: DPRK *Rodong Shinmun* calls for Japan to apologize for colonization and demands reparations.

Jan. 6, 2000: Japanese Foreign Ministry spokesman Sadaaki Numata denies that the government has ties with Takashi Sugishima, a former journalist being detained in the DPRK on spy charges.

Jan. 13, 2000: *Yomiuri Shimbun* reports that an unnamed Japanese foreign ministry official says the government seeks to avoid politicizing the Sugishima case with the DPRK.

Jan. 22, 2000: Japanese Prime Minister's office releases a national survey showing for the first time in 11 years a larger percentage (48 percent) of respondents feeling closer to the ROK than not (46.9 percent).

Jan. 28, 2000: Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi's new year foreign policy speech states the establishment of diplomatic ties with the DPRK as an objective.

Jan. 31, 2000: DPRK's *Rodong Shinmun* warns the DPRK will suspend planned talks with Japan on normalization if Japan continues to make allegations of DPRK kidnapping of Japanese citizens.

Feb. 1, 2000: U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) meets in Seoul.

Feb. 23, 2000: The Japanese-DPRK Friendship Association of Politicians is formed. Former Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama is the association's first president; 169 Diet members, including those from the Japanese Communist Party, join the association.

Feb. 26-27, 2000: Japan-ROK-China environmental ministers meet in Beijing on the development of the PRC western region and environmental protection programs.

Mar. 1, 2000: Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi offers Japanese medical expertise to help treat DPRK atomic bomb victims.

Mar. 1, 2000: ROK protests in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul in celebration of the 81st anniversary of the Mar. 1st movement.

Mar. 6, 2000: Families of Japanese allegedly kidnapped by DPRK agents stage a protest in front of the foreign ministry against government plans to resume food aid to the DPRK.

Mar. 7, 2000: Japanese government announces its plan to send 100,000 tons of rice as aid to the DPRK.

Mar. 13, 2000: Japan-DPRK Red Cross talks take place in Beijing.

Mar. 15, 2000: Japan-ROK high-level military talks occur in Seoul between the chairman of Japan's Joint Staff Council Yuji Fujinawa and Cho Yung-kil, chairman of the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Mar. 18- 20, 2000: Japanese Education Minister Hirofumi Nakasone meets with his ROK counterpart, Moon Yong-lin in Seoul.

Mar. 20, 2000: Korean newspapers cite a Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA) report that DPRK-Japan trade totaled \$350.4 million in 1999, down 11.65 percent from 1998.

Mar. 22, 2000: Japanese Foreign Minister Yohei Kono announces that the Japanese and DPRK governments will hold normalization talks in Pyongyang April 4-8, 2000. DPRK former Vice Foreign Minister Jong Tae-hwa will represent the DPRK. Takano Kojiro, ambassador to the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization will represent Japan.

Mar. 25, 2000: Japanese Education Minister Hirofumi Nakasone meets with ROK Culture and Sightseeing Minister Park Ji-won in Sendai, Japan and discusses cultural exchanges.

Mar. 26, 2000: Japan-ROK foreign minister talks take place in Seoul. Foreign Minister Kono also consults with ROK President Kim Dae-jung regarding Japan's decision to send 100,000 tons of rice to the DPRK.

Mar. 29, 2000: Kojiro Takano, Japan's chief negotiator in the DPRK normalization talks, states that Tokyo and Pyongyang remain far apart on key issues, including the alleged abduction of Japanese citizens by the DPRK and the DPRK's demands for reparations.

Mar. 30, 2000: TCOG meeting occurs in Tokyo, with Yukio Takeuchi, Japan's deputy vice foreign minister for foreign policy, US State Department counselor Wendy Sherman, and ROK deputy minister of foreign affairs and trade Jang Jai-ryong participating.