

Japan-Korea Relations: History Haunts, Engagement Dilemmas

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The name of the game in Japan-Korea relations this past quarter? History. This variable surfaced in the form of proposed revisions in a Japanese junior high school history textbook, souring Seoul-Tokyo diplomatic relations. It also surfaced with regard to new revelations concerning DPRK atomic bomb victims. The major “non-event” was the absence of policy coordination among Japan, the ROK, and the United States as the transition process to the new Bush administration remained incomplete (in terms of the Asia policy-team appointments) and Korea policy undergoes inter-agency review. While a trilateral coordination meeting took place at the end of the quarter in Seoul to manage the modalities of DPRK policy, the larger dilemma for Japan and DPRK policy remains clear.

Japan-ROK Relations: Just as Things Were Getting Better...

After a prolonged period of very positive interaction that lasted several years, history came back to haunt Seoul-Tokyo relations this quarter. The problem, as in the past, centered on the Japanese Education Ministry’s screening of proposed revisions to a junior high school history textbook by a group of relatively obscure nationalist historians led by Nishio Kanji. Among the passages considered offensive by aggrieved parties was reference to Japan’s 1910 annexation of the Peninsula as supported by the United States and Europe as a measure to stabilize East Asia, and reference to the annexation as “legal” following “the fundamental rules of international relations.”

The Ministry of Education’s deliberation over these and other revisions sparked protests by Seoul, Pyongyang, Beijing, and even Taiwan in late-February-early-March. On the one issue that always seems to unite Koreans, historians from the North and South issued joint statements condemning the Japanese. Public outcry in the South was strong enough that ROK officials sought a postponement of Japan-ROK scheduled ministerial talks and former premier Kim Jong-pil was sent to Japan on a quiet special envoy mission to seek a resolution to the problem (March 8).

Many might view the current textbook controversy as evidence of the absence of historical reconciliation between Seoul and Tokyo; however, if one looks more closely, the latest controversy is arguably an indicator of *how far* Japan-ROK relations have come in terms of dealing with history. Events of similar and even less severe magnitude in the past have had a far more devastating impact on relations. In the 1950s, for example, single sentences by a Japanese official with regard to historical interpretations resulted in four-year ruptures in diplomatic normalization negotiations. As late as the 1980s, bilateral tensions over a similar textbook controversy were so severe they disrupted parallel bilateral loan negotiations, and even caused Japanese tour groups to cancel trips to Seoul. By contrast, today's dispute is characterized by low-key statements, moderate attitudes, and the absence of histrionics. President Kim Dae-jung called for an accurate reading of history (March 9) but avoided any direct demands on Japan, fully acknowledging that such demands would violate Japan's domestic affairs (such demands were common practice in the past). Both sides made clear that postponement of the ministerial meetings had as much to do with uncertainty in Japan's domestic political situation as with the textbook issue. And perhaps most important, Seoul and Tokyo officials, while acknowledging the importance of the issue, pledged that it would not affect the entire relationship. These reactions offer a perspective and rationality on history absent in the past. Such disputes are simultaneously reminders of the past and tests of a more maturing relationship.

Japan-DPRK Relations: History and A-Bomb Victims Too

While the textbook controversy tested the durability of the Japan-ROK cooperative partnership, it offered a vivid reminder of how far Japan and the DPRK are from reconciliation. Textbooks are the not only manifestation of the yawning gulf in Tokyo-Pyongyang reconciliation, as this past quarter saw new revelations regarding North Korean atomic bomb victims. This group (*pip'okja* in Korean, *hibakusha* in Japanese) refers to conscripted Korean laborers forced to work in Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II, who found themselves inadvertent victims of the bombings in August 1945. According to Korean sources, of the 80,000 Koreans in the two cities in 1945, approximately 40,000 perished and 30,000 more near the hypo center of the blast were irradiated. About 23,000 of these A-bomb survivors returned to Korea after the war.

In response to DPRK demands for compensation, a Japanese foreign ministry fact-finding mission (led by Asian Affairs Deputy Director-General Sato Shigekazu) reported that some 1,353 cases (928 alive) existed at the end of 2000 in North Korea. Whether compensation for these victims will be dealt with individually as civil cases or folded into a larger normalization settlement is unclear. In the South Korean case, official compensation by the Japanese government fell under the 1965 settlement, but supplemental assistance was provided periodically by the two governments (e.g., 1981 cost-sharing for transporting repatriated *pip'okja* to Hiroshima for medical treatment; the May 1990 Roh Tae-woo- Toshio Kaifu summit produced \$12.6 million in Japanese assistance to ROK Red Cross).

Japan-DPRK Normalization Talks: The Dilemma Worsens

Even if the two governments can reach a mutually satisfactory outcome on A-bomb survivors compensation, this would represent one very small step in the excruciatingly slow Japan-DPRK reconciliation process. Indeed, if the big event for the quarter was the history dispute, the corresponding “non-event” was the absence of any movement whatsoever on normalization talks. Undoubtedly this was a function of the holding pattern all parties were placed on after the Bush-Kim summit (March 7) and the new U.S. administration’s signaling of possible changes in North Korea policy pending completion of a policy review. General statements in support of trilateral engagement with the North emerging from the Trilateral Coordination Oversight Group meetings at the end of the quarter (March 26) were a welcome sign that not all had come to a screeching halt following the Bush-Kim summit (the U.S. and ROK reportedly disagreed on the pace of re-engaging with the North). However, even if the Bush administration emerges at the end of its deliberations somewhere near the Clinton administration’s support of Kim Dae-jung’s Sunshine Policy (as many experts expect), Japan faces some fundamental dilemmas on engagement.

Japan’s basic dilemma is that actions taken in support of allied engagement with the North may counterintuitively serve to undercut Japan’s own interests and policy (see “What’s Behind the Smile?” *Comparative Connections* Vol. 2 No. 3 http://www.csis.org/pacfor/cc/003Qjapan_skorea.html). There are three dimensions to the problem. The first deeper problem for Japanese engagement is the inability to distinguish clearly between DPRK tactics and intentions. Skeptics and optimists agree that Pyongyang’s diplomatic offensives reflect a change in tactics largely for the purpose of regime survival. The as-yet unanswered question is whether a fundamental change in the nature of the regime’s intentions has also taken place. All three allies have been willing to risk some opacity on Pyongyang’s underlying preferences and pursue engagement as a window on these intentions. The dilemma for Japan, relative to the other allies, is that there are arguably fewer “baskets” of transparency-building issues on which to engage in order to get a better sense of DPRK intentions. For example, Seoul has a weighty basket of issues, including family reunions, infrastructure rejuvenation projects, ministerial meetings, and summits, on which to gauge further DPRK intentions. To a lesser extent than Seoul, Washington too has a basket of issues, including MIA remains and terrorism, where DPRK concessions offer a window on whether intentions rather than tactics are changing. However, for Japan, the comparable basket of issues is substantially lighter. Home visits for Japanese wives is a potential vehicle to communicate political goodwill, but even with DPRK concessions, there is little value-added in terms of understanding preferences. Similarly, the abduction issue has been a major impediment to normalization talks, but actions by Pyongyang to resolve this issue, again, do not convey a sense of “costliness” on Pyongyang’s part and create confidence of a change in preferences or aggressive intentions vis à vis Japan.

One response to the above problem might be for Japan to expand the list of issues on which it could engage the DPRK. However, the problem here (as illustrated above) is that historical animosity places inherent limits on the range of available issues. One assumes that the DPRK is undergoing significant internal adjustment as the domestic images of Seoul and Washington underwent rapid reconstruction after the June 2000 summit. To effect a similar transformation

with Japan is difficult, particularly if DPRK identity and national purpose needs to be constructed negatively (i.e., against an adversary). Moreover, if one of the primary causes for historical reconciliation between Japan and South Korea was the ROK's development and democratization (see "Rooting the Pragmatic," *Comparative Connections* Second Quarter 1999 http://www.csis.org/pacfor/cc/992Qjapan_skorea.html), then this offers a positive example of everything that is missing from a historical reconciliation formula between Japan and the North. This assessment does not deny that a normalization settlement may still occur between Tokyo and Pyongyang, but it does mean that historical reconciliation will not. Hence a normalization settlement would result in a situation similar to 1965, where material incentives (security and economics) pressed a settlement, but perceptions and attitudes remained highly antagonistic. From the Japanese perspective, this then begs two questions: Why press for normalization, if Japan will still remain demonized in DPRK rhetoric; and why press for normalization, if residual historical enmity ensures that a settlement will provide little in terms of a window on DPRK intentions?

The third dimension of Japan's engagement dilemma is perhaps the most problematic. While Tokyo supports the Sunshine Policy, conservative circles in Japan are rightfully worried about being entrapped in a position where the thaw on the Peninsula obscures Japan's security interests. Indeed, there appears to be an inverse correlation between positive developments in U.S.-DPRK and ROK-DPRK dialogue on the one hand and negative developments in Japan-DPRK dialogue on the other. For example, in the summer and fall of 2000, the June inter-Korean summit and exchange visits by General Jo Myong-rok and Secretary Albright had a discernibly mollifying impact on DPRK propaganda toward Seoul and Washington. However, during this period, the propaganda machine focused with laser beam intensity on Japan. Similarly, one of the primary reasons Japanese officials came away empty-handed from normalization dialogue at the end of 2000 (see "Ending 2000 with a Whimper, Not a Bang" *Comparative Connections* Vol. 2 No. 4 http://www.csis.org/pacfor/cc/004Qjapan_skorea.html) was Pyongyang's disinterest as the possibility of a Clinton visit loomed large. Japan faces a catch-22: It supports U.S. and South Korean engagement with the DPRK, but the very success of this engagement only undercuts Japan's own initiatives with the North.

In the context of trilateral policy coordination, what is perhaps most worrying as one looks down the road of Japan-DPRK dialogue is that even best-case scenarios appear somewhat unsettling from a Japanese security perspective. If one imagines a "final bargain" for the DPRK in the future, where it trades some conventional arms cuts and long-range ballistic missile aspirations for money and regime survival, this would address U.S. and South Korean non-proliferation and Peninsular security concerns but would not bring security to Japan because of the residual and real No-dong threat. As noted in *Comparative Connections* Vol. 2 No. 3, the deployed No-dong missiles are the most immediately threatening to Japanese security. They also constitute the operational security capabilities that Pyongyang is least likely to part with. Japan may therefore be stuck between a rock and a hard place.

The uncompleted missile talks left at the end of the Clinton administration only amplifies this last point. The negotiations centered on a DPRK ban of all exports, production, testing, and further deployment of missiles in excess of 500 kilometers in exchange for free civilian satellite launches and compensation "in-kind" for revenues gained through its missile sales (in the form

of food, economic, and humanitarian aid). As is well-known, these talks broke down for a variety of reasons, most important of which were ambiguities with regard to verification measures for such agreements. However, in the context of Japan's dilemmas, the U.S.-DPRK talks were wholly unsuccessful at getting Pyongyang to address the 100 deployed No-dong missiles.

Japan's engagement dilemmas are equally apparent with regard to the North's chemical and biological weapons threat (CBW). Next to the ballistic missile and nuclear weapons threats posed by the North, the CBW threat (estimated to be the third largest stockpile behind that of the United States and Russia) is of intense, but less publicly expressed, concern in Japan. However, neither U.S.-DPRK security bilaterals nor ROK-DPRK dialogue include this issue. The reasoning is two-fold. Addressing the missile threat can by default address the CBW threat (i.e., by negating the primary means of delivery); and because U.S. war-planning on the Peninsula includes potential CBW-use by the North, such threats are seen in the context of conventional force negotiations (should these ever occur). While both rationales make sense, neither is comforting from a Japanese perspective. In particular, the first does not address the likelihood of unconventional means of delivering CBW, a fact not lost on the Japanese (who remember the Aum Shinrikyo sarin gas attack in a Tokyo subway). The upshot with regard to DPRK engagement among the three allies is the same: If the current portfolio of negotiations held by Seoul and Washington go well, they could easily bypass vital Japanese security concerns.

Some might ask, "Who cares if Japan is left behind?" If the U.S. and ROK can make a deal with the DPRK that encompasses long-range missiles, nuclear threats, and some conventional force reductions, then this is not bad. The problem is that you cannot get the latter without the former. The biggest material carrot out there for successful U.S.-ROK engagement with the North is Japanese financial support--either in the form of a normalization settlement or Tokyo's consent to billions of dollars in IMF-World Bank loans for Pyongyang. The more optimistic argue that Japan as a "good ally" should toe the line with Seoul and Washington, even if its own needs are not being directly addressed. And pigs can fly (especially in the current domestic-political environment in Japan).

The outlook: Japan-ROK bilaterals in the next quarter (particularly a visit by JDA Director Saito Toshini) are likely to refocus Seoul-Tokyo lenses on the overarching and important security issues. No movement is likely on Japan-DPRK talks until the summer. In part, the pace will depend on who succeeds Mori as premier in Japan. Nonaka Hiromu is known to have the sort of political connections that could jump start talks with Pyongyang. But how such connections can massage the larger engagement dilemmas and satisfy a skeptical Japanese public is at best unclear.

Chronology of Japan-Korea Relations¹

January-March 2001

¹ Chronology prepared with the assistance of Hannah Lee.

Jan. 5, 2001: DPRK's *Rodong Sinmun* carries an article warning of the Japanese military threat and legislation in Japan aimed at enabling the Self-Defense Forces to operate over wider areas.

Jan. 5, 2001: John R. Bolton (senior vice-president of the American Enterprise Institute) says that the diplomatic focus in Asia will focus on managing the PRC's negative reaction to missile defense plans of the U.S. Bush administration and strengthening the support of Japan, ROK, and Taiwan for missile defense.

Jan. 6, 2001: ROK Foreign Minister Lee Joung-binn phone conversation with his Japanese counterpart, Kono Yohei, expressing hope that the Japanese government's screening of junior high school history textbooks this year will go smoothly.

Jan. 6, 2001: FMs Kono and Lee agree that Japan, the ROK, and the U.S. should continue close ties in dealing with the DPRK despite the change in U.S. administration.

Jan. 9, 2001: The Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) selects a Japanese business consortium (Hitachi-Toshiba) to supply the turbine generators for the planned light-water reactors in the DPRK over GE of the U.S.

Jan. 12, 2001: The *Asahi Shimbun* reports that the Japanese government in Diet sessions maintained that the satisfactory resolution of the DPRK abduction issue is a pre-condition to normalization.

Jan. 18, 2001: DPRK freighter arrives at Osaka Port, Japan, to transport the first installment (10,000 tons) of 500,000 tons of rice aid committed by Japan to the DPRK at the end of 2000.

Jan. 22, 2001: Japanese Vice FM Kawashima Yutaka says that Japan hopes DPRK leader Kim Jong-il's recent trip to Shanghai would influence the DPRK to move towards reform and opening.

Jan. 23, 2001: FM Kono says that Japan's normalization with the DPRK is not only inevitable but also morally necessary; he argues that while Japan must be cognizant of the history between the two countries, the DPRK must acknowledge Japan's humanitarian concerns (i.e., kidnappings).

Jan. 26, 2001: FM Kono meets with U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice in Washington.

Jan. 31, 2001: Japanese Ambassador to the ROK Terada says that given the Bush administration's cautious approach to the DPRK, continued close cooperation among the U.S., the ROK, and Japan is important for stability on the Korean Peninsula.

Feb. 9, 2001: *Sankei Shimbun* reports that DPRK leader Kim Jong-il's instructions in April 1999 to the Association of Pro-DPRK Residents in Japan emphasized pragmatism and flexibility in pursuing the path of reform while maintaining outward appearances of ideological rigidity.

Feb. 9, 2001: *Choson Ilbo* newspaper of the Chongryon (General Association of [DPRK] Korean Residents in Japan), reports that Kim Jong-il's latest trips to Shanghai do not reflect reform plans along the Chinese model; the DPRK will follow its own *juche* model of reform.

Feb. 15, 2001: Seoul decides to provide up to 36 billion yen to support bankrupt pro-ROK credit unions in Japan on condition that the unions cope with their bad loans; asks for Tokyo's approval.

Feb. 16, 2001: The "foreign compatriots" from the PRC, Japan, Russia, and other countries make visits to Pyongyang on the day of DPRK's leader Kim Jong-il's 59th birthday.

Feb. 22, 2001: DPRK Foreign Ministry threatens to resume long-range missiles tests in retaliation against any hardline changes in Bush's policy toward North Korea.

Feb. 23, 2001: *Choson Ilbo* reports that the DPRK Foreign Ministry made an official statement criticizing a proposed Japanese history textbook containing statements that justify annexation of Korean Peninsula.

Feb. 24, 2001: The DPRK's *Korean Central News Agency* (KCNA) cited a newspaper commentary criticizing Japan for denying its wartime aggression. North Korea demands redress over Japan's wartime past crimes.

Feb. 25, 2001: *Japanese Economic Newswire* reports that Japanese officials express pessimism about normalization talks with DPRK.

Mar. 2, 2001: In Pyongyang, DPRK and ROK historians issue a joint declaration accusing Japan of trying to whitewash its history of aggression.

Mar. 7, 2001: *Yomiuri Shimbun* article states that Japanese diplomatic sources in Washington are concerned about differences between U.S. and ROK in DPRK policy and call for early re-coordination of DPRK policy among the U.S., the ROK, and Japan.

Mar. 8, 2001: During the ROK-U.S. summit, the two leaders reaffirm that South Korea and the U.S. continue to maintain close three-way cooperation with Japan regarding North Korean affairs.

Mar. 9, 2001: *Japan Times* editorial expresses concern over Bush administration's possible change in Korea policy, it warns that "treating Pyongyang like an enemy will ensure that it becomes one."

Mar. 9, 2001: Japan and the ROK postpone regularly scheduled annual ministerial meetings. ROK President Kim Dae-jung urges Japan to have a "correct" understanding of its history.

Mar. 10, 2001: The Japanese Defense Agency research institute, National Institute for Defense Studies, releases its annual Defense Outlook. Regarding Korea, it expresses caution about a

rapid reduction in Peninsular tensions and concerns about North Korea's ability to manage simultaneous processes of external opening and internal reform.

Mar. 13, 2001: DPRK representatives to the United Nations release a communiqué maintaining that Japan is not qualified to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

Mar. 17, 2001: White House announces that President Bush will travel to Tokyo, Seoul, and Shanghai (to attend the APEC summit, October 20-21) in the fall.

Mar. 18, 2001: The Japanese government's fact-finding team on DPRK atomic bomb victims says that an alleged 1,353 people in the DPRK were victims of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

Mar. 19, 2001: Bush-Mori summit discusses security issues surrounding the PRC, Russia, and the DPRK.

Mar. 26, 2001: Trilateral Coordination Oversight Group meeting in Seoul.

Mar. 26, 2001: Council on Foreign Relations Korea Task Force Report stresses the importance of continuing trilateral policy coordination among the U.S., Japan, and South Korea under the Bush administration

Mar. 27, 2001: South Korea joins the Missile Technology Control Regime.

Mar. 29, 2001: New ROK FM Han Seung-soo consults with Japanese Ambassador to the ROK Terada on the textbook screening controversy. Both agree to maintain the overall positive tenor of Japan-ROK relations.

Mar. 29, 2001: ROK NGO protests the Hiroshima High Court's rejection of an appeal by three former ROK comfort women and seven ROK female forced laborers demanding a formal Japanese government apology and 396 million yen in compensation.