



Japan-ROK Relations: Rooting the Pragmatic

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Since normalization in 1965, Japan-Republic of Korea (ROK) relations have been propelled by two countervailing dynamics. On the one hand, the inability to overcome their difficult shared history has impeded genuine improvements in contemporary relations. On the other, pressing economic and security developments that have often compelled pragmatic cooperation. At times this cooperation has been substantive, but often it is of a superficial and transitory nature given the negative history between the two.

These dual themes of alignment and antagonism are evident as one looks at bilateral developments over the second quarter of 1999, with alignment clearly prevailing during this period. Examples include the establishment of communications hotlines between the two militaries and high level meetings between ROK and Japanese senior military officers and other security and defense officials. Political relations also continued to bask in the afterglow of the October 1998 and March 1999 Obuchi-Kim Summits. From a U.S. policy perspective, relations between these key Asian allies are moving in a direction that suits American security interests, but not without reservation. Potential disagreements between the ROK and Japan (and U.S.) over the appropriate response to possible future North Korean provocation could cause a rebirth of antagonism.

The Security Front

What is most striking about relations over the past quarter has been the volume of consultations and military-to-military interaction on security issues. Based on a January 1999 agreement between then-ROK Defense Minister Chun Yong-taek (now National Intelligence Service Director) and his Japanese counterpart Hosei Norota, communication “hot lines” were established in May between the Ministry of National Defense and Japanese Defense Agency as well as between air and naval components (i.e., ROK Combat Air Command and Japan Air Self Defense Force; and ROK Naval Operation Command and Japan Maritime Self Defense Force). The same month Korean and Japanese air force chiefs held successful meetings in Seoul, committing to increase bilateral exchanges and strengthen cooperation. The two navies announced plans for a combined naval exercise off Cheju Island scheduled for August 4-6, 1999. In various diplomatic fora, Japanese officials consulted with Korean counterparts on the positive

implications for Korean security of the passing in the Lower House of the new U.S.-Japan defense guidelines. And perhaps most important, Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo created in April the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG), a body that is to meet at least once every quarter to share and coordinate policies on North Korea. (TCOG was established in Hawaii by agreement among former U.S. Defense Secretary William Perry, ROK National Security Advisor (now Unification Minister) Lim Dong-won, and MOFA Director-General Ryozo Kato.)

Clearly, the causes for much of this cooperation are jointly-held and expedient concerns about the DPRK security threat. The hotline decision, for example, was specifically in response to the inability on the part of the two navies to communicate adequately when DPRK ships intruded into Japanese waters last autumn. The TCOG, which has already met twice since its inception, addresses the need for a forum in which the three allies are able to share information on standing issues like the Kumchang-ni site inspection, and the Perry policy review, as well as on unexpected incidents like the west coast altercation (June 15) and the North's temporary detention of an ROK tourist.

From a broader perspective however, what is distinct about the activities this past quarter is that they represent the first step in the evolution beyond pragmatic and transitory cooperation to a more deeply-rooted and pre-planned security relationship. The naval exercise scheduled for 4-5 August, for example, while only a small-scale search-and-rescue exercise, is unprecedented in the history of modern Japan-ROK relations. The ROK Navy will provide one destroyer, one escort ship, one surveillance aircraft and one helicopter, while JMSDF will provide three escort ships, one surveillance aircraft, and two-three helicopters.

Combined exercises and exchange visits of military officers appear like minor accomplishments, but taken as a whole represent a vast improvement in substantive interaction on security issues. It was only within one generation's lifetime that the notion of Japanese military personnel setting foot again on Korean soil provoked such wrenching reactions that any bilateral defense exchanges -- even during the security-scarce conditions of the Cold War era -- were ceremonial, occasional, and unpublicized. The meetings this quarter represent the slow, incremental deepening of a security relationship that started in 1997 with the decision to set up a regular bilateral security consultation (director-general level, see table below).

In a related vein, the TCOG is also significant in that it institutionalizes a process of trilateral consultation among the allies. One of the flaws in U.S. management of its two alliances in Northeast Asia has always been the inability to coordinate trilaterally despite an established framework for bilateral consultations. Trilateral consultations certainly existed in the past, but were done solely on an ad hoc basis. Perry has done well to place strong emphasis on this aspect of the current DPRK policy review and, regardless of the outcome of the current semi-crisis with the North, this will be one of the lasting fruits of his efforts.

The dark cloud in this silver lining: This quarter's frenetic activity to improve bilateral and trilateral policy coordination masks, or more exactly exists because of, real

and potentially severe policy gaps among Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo. These lurk just below the surface and could emerge with further DPRK provocations. The problem is not a difference in overall objectives vis-à-vis the North, but subtle differences in the preference orderings of those objectives. For example, everyone sees the nuclear and missile issues as important, but the U.S. and Japan place a relatively higher premium on these than the ROK, for whom the DPRK's conventional artillery threat makes missiles redundant. This was evident not only in the disparate reactions to the August Taepodong launch in Seoul versus Tokyo, but also in the tepid ROK response to U.S.-Japan TMD initiatives in the region.

Similarly, while Seoul is adamant about realizing family reunions by the end of the calendar year as a tangible product of its "sunshine policy," they do not search out DPRK movement on the issue of the kidnapping of Japanese nationals with the same fervor. Contrary to traditional Cold War patterns of interaction between Japan and the ROK over North Korea, it is more likely now that DPRK provocations could cause Japan to abandon KEDO and engagement with the North long before the ROK would. In particular, a second missile launch would appear to be the "red line" for both the Americans and Japanese. But the Kim Dae-jung government, by drawing the same line, would face the prospect of admitting failure of a policy and paradigm for inter-Korean peace on which it has staked its political life.

The policy implication from a U.S. perspective is not so much to seek a parity of priorities between Seoul and Tokyo on individual issues like family reunions or housewife abductions. Although this would be ideal, it is not realistic given that these issues appeal to respective domestic constituencies and are therefore not easily fungible for political gain (e.g., getting movement on Japanese housewife abductions will not win Kim Dae-jung the same political kudos as family reunions and vice-versa for Obuchi). Instead, the challenge is bringing into alignment the disparate time horizons in the two governments' strategies. Again, "time is short" for the Americans and Japanese as the status quo without resolution of the missile issue only brings its cities and populations in closer range of better-than-anticipated DPRK missiles and technology. No doubt these issues are important to South Koreans, but the Sunshine Policy, if Kim Dae-jung had his druthers, is a long-term policy that would rise above even these issues and transform the status quo into a decade-long phase of peaceful existence (which incidentally is the first stage of a de facto united Korean confederation, according to Kim's past scholarship). The irony is that these dynamics run contrary to traditional Cold War patterns of South Korean urgency and Japanese reticence vis-à-vis the DPRK. The advantage today is that the parties have the institution of the TCOG in which to narrow their differences.

The Political Front

On the political front, two points deserve mention. First, the events of the past quarter point to the increasing political institutionalization of the "new" Japan-ROK relationship. The primary channel through which business was conducted from the 1960s through early 1980s was backroom deals between elites in late-night parlors in

Seoul and Tokyo. These activities were replete with corruption and side-payments that greatly benefited the participants, but reinforced negative images in the general public about the shadiness of relations (e.g., 1962 Kim-Ohira secret memorandum). This mode of interaction has been replaced by institutionalized, public, and popular channels of communication at governmental, nongovernmental, and increasingly now, military levels. While in the past, the only regularized forum for official government exchanges was the annual joint ministerial conference, as table 1 details, both the frequency and variety of official channels have increased exponentially, resembling that of two established democracies:

TABLE 1

Date	Type	Established	Comments
1965-1985	Joint Ministerial Conference	1967	annual
	High-level Foreign Policy council	1984	annual
1986-1999	Foreign Ministers meeting	1986	annual
	21st Century Committee	1988	occasional
	MOFA Asia Bureau Directors Meetings	1991	occasional
	Assistant Secretary trilats (re: DPRK)	1992	occasional
	Korea-Japan Forum	1993	occasional
	Director-General Security Dialogue	1997	annual
	Executive Summit (Kim-Obuchi)	1998	annual (occurred periodically prior to this)
	TCOG	1999	quarterly
	Hotlines	1999	MND-JDA

Second, political relations between Seoul and Tokyo continue to bask in the afterglow of the Kim-Obuchi summit in October 1998. Although the leaders held another summit in March 1999, the former was clearly the high-water mark for both governments and arguably for all of Japan-ROK normalized relations. The crux of this success, as recorded in the popular media, was: the 1998 meeting's producing the first Japanese government statement of regret for the colonial period *recorded* in official documentation, and the summit's very positive atmospherics which stood in stark contrast to subsequent meetings between Obuchi and Jiang Zemin. The two summits also produced an action plan for improved bilateral economic cooperation. The October 1998 "Joint Declaration on a ROK-Japan Partnership for the 21st Century" and the March 1999 "Agenda for Korea-Japan Economic Cooperation" led to several meetings this quarter on

bilateral economic issues. The two countries have met to consider negotiating a Bilateral Investment Treaty as well as a Free Trade Area, and for the first time economic officials met at the working group level to consult on mutual interests in the upcoming WTO round.

These were undoubtedly all-important but what was of equal if not greater significance were the little things that went largely unnoticed in media accounts. In speeches before the Diet, Kim Dae-jung spoke of how Koreans were equally responsible as Japanese for putting the history issue to rest and moving forward. The two leaders called “infantile” the fixation on 50 years of negative Japan-ROK interaction at the expense of 1500 years of exchanges and cooperation. Japan trumpeted Korea’s successful road to democracy while Korea lauded Japan’s peace constitution and commitment to overseas assistance. These attempts to reconstruct history, to emphasize positive interactions over negative, and to express admiration for the other’s accomplishments were not present in past exchanges. They are subtle but important attempts to transform the dominant narrative of this relationship as well as give deeper roots to what was formerly only pragmatic cooperation.

Chronology of Japan-ROK Relations

April-June 1999

April 20, 1999: ROK Navy announces that Korea and Japan will conduct a joint maritime drill on the open seas east of Cheju-do in August.

April 20, 1999: Japan moves to curb pork imports from Korea.

April 21, 1999: Shoichi Makagawa, Japanese minister of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries, proposes regularly bilateral meetings to discuss fishery issues.

April 25, 1999: Korea, the United States, and Japan agree in Hawaii to establish a Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) for policy coordination on North Korean affairs.

April 27, 1999: Japanese Defense Guidelines pass the Diet Lower House.

April 29, 1999: Japan Maritime Safety Agency Director Yukio Kusunoki meets with ROK Maritime Policy Head Kim Dae-won to establish liaison office to exchange information on suspicious ships.

April 29, 1999: President Kim Dae-jung fires Vice Maritime Affairs Minister Chun Sung-kyu, holding him responsible for the corruption scandal surrounding Korea-Japan fisheries pact.

May 4, 1999: South Korean and Japanese military announce the establishment of communications “hotlines” for the exchange of information in case of emergency.

May 4, 1999: U.S. Republican lawmaker presents visiting Japanese Premier Obuchi with a report urging the creation of a combined U.S.-Japan-ROK early warning system against ballistic missile attack.

May 7, 1999: Four-day visit by JASDF Chief Yuji Hiroaka to Seoul to meet with ROK Air Force Chief Park Chun-taek.

May 7, 1999: President Kim Dae-jung in *Le Monde* interview says that normalization of Japan-DPRK relations should include Japanese compensation to the North for its past colonial rule of Korea.

May 15, 1999: ROK and Japan agree to hold annual meeting of fisheries ministers.

May 17, 1999: In weekly press conference, Kim Dae-jung urges North Korea to accept U.S.-ROK-Japan proposals for reducing tension on the Peninsula.

May 17, 1999: ROK and Japan agree to launch a joint pilot electronic commerce service in 2000.

May 24, 1999: William Perry, U.S. Policy Review Coordinator on North Korea, meets with South Korean and Japanese officials in Tokyo before departing for 4-day trip to Pyongyang (TCOG meeting).

May 26, 1999: Japan explains new Japan-U.S. Defense Guidelines to South Korea.

May 28-29, 1999: William Perry ends 4-day trip to Pyongyang and briefs American, South Korean, and Japanese officials in Seoul (TCOG meeting).

June 2, 1999: Japanese Diet Lower House unanimously approves an agreement on the burden sharing of costs for the construction of two light-water nuclear reactors in North Korea.

June 10, 1999: Japanese Vice Foreign Minister Shunji Yanai arrives in Seoul for three-day discussions on a wide range of issues including how to deepen relations between the two countries and how to step up coordination in implementing North Korea policies.

June 16, 1999: Japanese Foreign Minister Masahiko Komura expresses support for South Korean efforts to solve the conflict with North Korea in the Yellow Sea.

June 17, 1999: Korea and Japan form a civilian-level consultation body to discuss promotion of cultural exchanges between the two neighboring countries.

June 22, 1999: International and ROK environmental activists threaten to protest a shipment of 440 kilograms of weapons-grade plutonium to Japan in July.

June 23, 1999: Former Japanese Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama announces cancellation of a planned non-partisan Diet fact-finding mission to Pyongyang.

June 25, 1999: TCOG meets in Washington.

June 30, 1999: ROK fully lifts 20-year old import source diversification system, primarily designed to restrict import of select Japanese products.