



Japan-ROK Relations: DPRK Dialogue: A Little Luck the Fourth Time round?

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Japan-South Korea relations remained on an even keel, still riding the waves of success from the past two Kim-Obuchi summits and from the trilateral cooperation precedents set by the Perry review. The most noteworthy activities for this past quarter were not in Japan-South Korea relations but on the Japan-DPRK dyad. Events during the period marked the first serious discussions on normalization since 1992. This dialogue, while preliminary and far from conclusive, was welcomed by both Seoul and Washington, and indeed from a U.S. perspective falls in line with the comprehensive engagement strategy toward the DPRK outlined by the Perry process. The success of future Japan-DPRK normalization dialogue will depend on resolution of a number of issues, all of which are far from minor.

The December 1999 Meetings: Beginning of a Thaw

The most noteworthy event for the quarter in Japan-Korea relations was the resumption of preliminary normalization dialogue between Tokyo and Pyongyang. Suspended since 1992, Japan-DPRK dialogue saw improvement through three events during the quarter. In early November, Japan partially lifted sanctions on the DPRK, including the ban on charter flights and restrictions on unofficial contacts with DPRK authorities (imposed after the August 1998 Taepodong launch). This was followed in early December by a suprapartisan Japanese delegation led by former Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama to Pyongyang. The three-day visit was both exploratory and goodwill in nature, largely for the purpose as described by Japanese officials of cultivating an “atmosphere” conducive to the resumption of dialogue. The meetings took place without preconditions on either side, and the former Premier carried a letter from Prime Minister Obuchi to DPRK leader Kim Jong-il expressing hope for improved relations. Japan subsequently lifted remaining sanctions (the most significant of which was on food aid) after the Murayama mission.

Two sets of talks (foreign ministry and Red Cross) ensued in Beijing in late-December. The MOFA talks were conducted at the director-general level (led by Koreshige Anami, director general of the Asian Affairs Division of Japanese Foreign Ministry, and Oh Woollok, director general of the 14th Bureau of the DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Aside from a stating of basic principles, these convened with an agreement to meet again in January or February 2000. The Red Cross talks produced a “humanitarian cooperation agreement” in which the two sides agreed to resume home visits for Japanese spouses of DPRK citizens. The two delegations also promised to advise their respective governments to address in prompt

fashion each side's key humanitarian concern -- for Japan, the alleged abduction of citizens by the DPRK, and for Pyongyang, the provision of food aid.

The December 1999 meetings marked a modest beginning to the Japan-DPRK normalization process, and indeed, the fourth such attempt over the past half-century. Efforts at improving relations took place during the detente years when a train of Japanese officials went to Pyongyang (most notably Tokyo Governor Ryokichi Minobe in 1971), the Japanese Diet established a League for Promotion of Friendship with North Korea, and memorandum trade agreements were signed. In the early 1980s, additional high-level initiatives were made through personal emissaries of Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone. Finally at the end of the Cold War, a delegation led by then LDP strongman Shin Kanemaru returned from Pyongyang in 1990 with grand but eventually failed aspirations for normalization.

History therefore cautions one from being overly optimistic about such endeavors. The December 1999 meetings may end up on history's trash heap as another failed initiative. Indeed, revelations about the North Korean detainment of a Japanese national on alleged spy charges in late December may throw a wrench into the whole process before it even gets started. Yet, some distinguishing aspects of the present iteration lead one to be at least marginally less pessimistic. The first is South Korea's Sunshine Policy. In marked contrast to the past, Seoul's support for Tokyo-Pyongyang dialogue removes a major obstacle to potential rapprochement outcomes. During the Kanemaru mission in 1990 until as late as 1995, Seoul's pegging of any minor improvements in Japan-DPRK relations to concomitant steps in inter-Korean dialogue made an already difficult diplomatic exercise for Japan even more complex. In a related vein, Japanese initiatives this time take place in the context of a larger coordinated effort among the allies in the region vis-a-vis North Korea. From a U.S. perspective, the December meetings and earlier Japanese actions on lifting sanctions and resuming KEDO funding all fall neatly within the Perry framework of comprehensive engagement. Tokyo's activities become that much more credible to the North when backed by Washington and Seoul rather than as maverick actions (as some perceived Kanemaru's initiatives in 1990). Finally, the impetus in Japan for improved relations with the North is substantively different as past initiatives took place before the DPRK demonstrated a direct missile threat to Japan.

Given the DPRK style of negotiation, normalization talks are certain to be protracted and difficult. Real progress will depend on a few things. First, Pyongyang must resolve the longstanding kidnap victims issue. Without this, it will become very difficult for Tokyo to garner domestic consensus to move forward (as recent polls have shown, there is already very little love lost on the DPRK among the Japanese public after the Taepodong launch). At the December meetings, the Japanese Red Cross delegation presented a list of ten alleged victims that the DPRK consented to investigate. Whether DPRK obstinance on the issue continues (operationalized as a token search with no results) will greatly depend on the degree to which it values the prospect of direct bilateral food aid from Japan. This looks to be the first quid pro quo in the normalization process. A degree of face-saving may be in the works, as Pyongyang may seek to classify these individuals, once located, as "missing" rather than abductees (the North has unequivocally denied Japanese allegations in the past).

Other major obstacles include how the two countries resolve the colonial past. There are two issues in this regard: monetary compensation and the apology. Regarding the former, the DPRK has operated from a formula first informally enunciated during the 1990 Kanemaru

mission where Japan must pay colonial reparations for the 45 years both before and after 1945. Official figures have not been quoted, but are reported to be in the range of \$5-10 billion. Aside from the actual amount (if any) that would come with a settlement, success will depend on DPRK willingness to forgo explicit references to these monies as colonial compensation. This was a key obstacle averted during the 1965 Japan-South Korean normalization negotiations where funds were provided by Japan in the form of low-interest commercial and government loans and outright grants, but not as colonial restitution *per se*. With regard to the formal colonial apology, one only hopes (but hardly expects) that the Japan-DPRK case can avoid the tortured battles over text, subtext, and semantics experienced in the past between Tokyo and Seoul.

The stakes in a normalization dialogue are high for both sides. For Pyongyang, a settlement holds out the prospect of food aid and economic aid when other avenues with the U.S. and South Korea, for the time being, may prove less fruitful (elaborated below). For Japan, traditional postwar aspirations to resolve relationships with all prior enemies (*senjo shori*) are supplemented by the urgent need to address the DPRK missile threat. Constructing a deal on missiles falls under the purview of the U.S.-DPRK bilaterals in Berlin, but clearly a Japan-DPRK normalization would be an important complementary piece of this puzzle.

Washington-Tokyo-Seoul Coordination: Humming Along

The precedents for trilateral coordination among the three allies established through the Perry policy review process and the Berlin agreement (October) continued to be followed throughout this quarter. Evidence of this is found not so much in new initiatives or agreements but in “business as usual” (e.g., meetings of the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group [TCOG] in advance of the U.S.-DPRK bilaterals in Berlin), and the absence of potentially friction-inducing events. The signing of the Turnkey Contract between the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) and the Korea Electric Power Company (KEPCO) was a good illustration of this. At the same time that it exemplified the smooth running of the next phase of the 1994 Agreed Framework, it also was tacit recognition of a significant non-event -- Japan’s resumption of KEDO funding and political support (earlier suspended after the Taepodong I test flight). On the Japan-ROK bilateral front, relations remained on an even keel over the quarter. The visit of the Japanese Emperor to Seoul, certain to be a watershed in relations, is now on the agenda formally between the two governments, with only the timing of the event to be worked out. The ROK foreign ministry and Blue House made numerous statements supporting Japan-DPRK normalization dialogue. The exception was some minor recriminations raised over Tok-do/Takeshima (but would Japan-ROK relations have any semblance of normalcy without these spats?).

Outlook: Stay Tuned for More on Japan-DPRK Relations

If DPRK negotiators and planners are half as intelligent as we give them credit for being, then the Japan channel may be where their foreign policy efforts will be focused for the immediate term in spite of the most recent detainment case. Status quo with some variations but no major breakthroughs are likely to be the programs on the U.S. and ROK channels. In the former case, the U.S. presidential elections do not offer Pyongyang an opportune time to

negotiate new steps with an outgoing administration that might then be reneged upon later. In the South Korean case, the results of legislative elections this spring could either boost or bust the Kim Dae-jung government's Sunshine Policy, which in either instance, means it is best for Pyongyang to wait. On the Japanese side, expect increased food aid to the DPRK, at least initially through third party organizations, and if progress on normalization dialogue goes well, the resumption of direct bilateral aid.

Chronology of Japan-ROK Relations **July – September 1999**

Oct 23-24: Japan-ROK annual joint ministerial meeting at Cheju island. ROK Prime Minister Kim Jong-pil and Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi reaffirm their governments' cooperation on policy toward the DPRK, discuss maritime resource cooperation projects, and future visit of Japanese Emperor to Korea.

Oct 25: Japanese Foreign Minister Yonei Kono consults with ROK president Kim Dae-Jung in Seoul on DPRK policy.

Nov 2: Japanese government announces a partial lifting of sanctions against the DPRK, ending the ban on Japanese-DPRK chartered flights and resuming unofficial contacts with DPRK authorities.

Nov 4: Revelations surface that the ROK government has permitted regular tourist ships to Takeshima/Tok-do Island despite its dispute with Japan over ownership of the island.

Nov 8: DPRK's official Korea Central Broadcasting Station (KCBS) reports that the DPRK retains the right under international law to retrieve cultural assets taken away by Japan during its colonial rule of the Korean Peninsula from 1910 to 1945.

Nov 9: Meeting of the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) in Washington in advance of U.S.-DPRK bilaterals in Berlin (Nov 15). Attended by ROK Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs Jang Jai-ryong, counselor to the U.S. Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, and Japanese director general for foreign policy Yukio Takeuchi.

Dec 1: Former Japanese Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama leads delegation of 16 lawmakers from Japan's ruling and opposition parties on a three-day visit to Pyongyang. Officials say the purpose of the visit was to "create an environment conducive to resumption of negotiations for normalisation of diplomatic ties."

Dec 2: Murayama and DPRK Secretary of the Central Committee of the Korean Workers Party Kim Young-sun agree to resume unconditional bilateral negotiations to normalize diplomatic relations within the year.

Dec 5: Hiromu Nonaka, a senior lawmaker of the Liberal Democratic Party and member of the Murayama delegation, calls for diplomatic ties between Japan and the DPRK by the end of 2000.

Dec 14: Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Mikio Aoki announces Japan's lifting of remaining sanctions against the DPRK.

Dec 14: ROK government releases statement applauding the Japanese action and supporting the resumption of Japan-DPRK dialogue.

Dec 15: KEDO signs turnkey contract with KEPCO for construction of two light water reactors in the DPRK.

Dec 19-21: Japan and DPRK hold Red Cross talks at the DPRK embassy in Beijing.

Dec 21-23: Japan-DPRK foreign ministry delegations (director general level) meet at the Japanese embassy in Beijing for preliminary talks on normalization.

Dec 21: Japanese and DPRK Red Cross delegations reach agreement on "humanitarian cooperation" in Beijing signed by Ho Hae-ryong (DPRK) and Tadateru Konoe (Japan).

Dec 21: Body of a DPRK soldier washes ashore off coast near Tokyo (seventh such case in 1999). Believed to be a botched defection or espionage attempt.

Dec 28: ROK government legislators raise questions regarding Japanese in Shimane Prefecture who have in recent years changed their permanent addresses in census records to Tok-do in the East Sea.

Dec 30: DPRK state-run news agency announces that authorities have detained a Japanese national, Takashi Sugishima, 60 on alleged spy charges since December 4. Japanese foreign ministry expressed grave concern over DPRK actions and requests an explanation.