

Japan-Korea Relations: Contemplating Sanctions

by Victor D. Cha
D.S. Song-Korea Foundation Chair,
Director, Project on American Alliances in Asia
Director, American Alliances in Asia Project, Georgetown University

The quarter saw no major bumps in Japan-South Korea relations as the two countries awaited the transition to the new Roh Moo-hyun government in the ROK. North Korean provocations during the quarter had a unifying effect on Seoul-Tokyo ties. They also raise the question of exactly what Japan would do if the North undertook any of the actions associated with crossing the “red line.” Accordingly, we look at what Japanese sanctions against the North might look like.

Japan-ROK Relations: Feeling Each Other Out

The quarter saw a series of bilateral meetings between Japanese and South Korean officials. Although nothing substantive came of these contacts, they were quite important in firming up the ground as all awaited the transition to the new government in South Korea. In the period from January to February (prior to the inauguration on Feb. 25), a series of high-level officials from Japan, including former Premier Mori Yoshiro, Foreign Minister Kawaguchi Yoriko, Democratic Party head Kan Naoto, and Social Democratic Party leader Doi Takako traveled to Seoul to meet with President-elect Roh.

In early February, a special envoy delegation dispatched by President-elect Roh met with Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro. Chyung Dai-Chul, the ROK delegation head, expressed Roh’s sincere desire to work closely and intimately with the government of Japan, and agreed to maintain close coordination of policies in dealing with the North Korean threat.

All of these preparatory contacts facilitated the first successful meeting between the two heads of state in late February. Following the inauguration ceremony, Roh and Koizumi held a 50-minute meeting. Following a well-advised outline of staying at the broad and positive level for the new South Korean president’s first meeting with a foreign leader, the discussion deftly avoided specific reference to issues like Koizumi’s Yasukuni Shrine visit (discussed below) and the launching of a short-range missile by the North into the

Sea of Japan. Roh and Koizumi agreed to pursue “future-oriented” relations, the conclusion of a bilateral free-trade agreement, and cooperation in dealing with North Korea. They agreed to invite Roh for a summit in Japan in the near future.

The cohering factor for all of these meetings was North Korea’s withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and restarting of the 5-megawatt reactor in January. To avert any negative ramifications for Seoul-Tokyo ties from the crisis with North Korea, Japanese officials also gave several well-placed interviews to major South Korean dailies to assure the South Korean public of Japanese intentions. In an interview with the *Chosun Ilbo*, the new Japanese ambassador to the ROK (Takano Toshiyuki) affirmed his personal commitment to maintain strong bilateral ties to deal with the North Korean threat. In an interview with the *Joongang Ilbo*, Japanese Defense Agency head Ishiba Shigeru responded to popular speculation about Japan’s “nuclear card” by stating that Japan had no intention of a “self-help” nuclear option *even* if there were a nuclear North Korea.

Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) meetings during the period reflected the same preoccupation with provocative North Korean actions. The January meeting of the group in Washington was marked by intensive discussions on strategy vis-à-vis North Korean provocation. The three countries released a joint statement calling on Pyongyang to come into prompt and verifiable compliance with its nonproliferation obligations and supported the Jan. 6 IAEA resolution condemning North Korean actions.

Bilateral relations encountered a minor spat over the visit to Yasukuni Shrine by Prime Minister Koizumi. This was the third trip during his premiership to honor Japan’s war dead. The reaction in Korea was predictable with a statement by the Foreign Ministry expressing concern over the Jan. 14 visit. But the conflagration over this was not nearly as grave as in the past. In part, this stemmed from the many other things occupying South Korea’s attention, including its economic problems, the new government, North Korean intransigence, and repairing the U.S.-ROK alliance. There is also a growing realization in South Korea that the problem of Yasukuni Shrine visits will never go away. The shrine visits are as much a domestic political issue as they are a part of a Japanese affirmation of national identity. For these reasons, the visits will never stop and the sooner Koreans realize this and ignore them, the better.

Japan-DPRK Relations: Missiles and Satellites

North Korean attempts at coercive bargaining during the quarter to rattle the Bush administration and force it into dialogue with Pyongyang predictably had negative effects on Japanese security. In late-February and early-March, North Korea flew two antiship cruise missiles toward Japan. Japan tried its best to downplay the events, saying in the first instance that the 90-km test did not technically violate the ballistic missile testing moratorium, and in the second instance that Tokyo had received advance notification of the test. Nevertheless, the threat was obvious. The Japanese Nikkei closed at its lowest level since March 1983 after the second missile test. Tokyo Gov. Ishihara Shintaro

tapped into the unspoken sentiments of some Japanese when he stated on March 24 that Japan should rearm itself against the threat.

Although Japan is a long way from fulfilling Ishihara's mandate for self-defense against the North Korean threat, Japan took a major step this quarter toward at least monitoring the threat. At the end of March, Japan launched its first two military satellites into orbit from Japan's space center on Tanegashima. The satellites are the first two of four planned satellites to be used for about five years. The proximate cause for the ¥250 billion (\$2 billion) surveillance program was the 1998 North Korean *Taepodong* launch over Japan, which shocked the Japanese as to how vulnerable and incapable they were at dealing with such a problem, and was aptly referred to thereafter as Japan's "Sputnik." With these imagery satellites, Japan hopes to monitor North Korean missile tests and other dangerous activities. Some technical experts argue that the resolution of these satellites will still not rival that of the United States and therefore will not rid Japan of its total dependence on the U.S. for overhead intelligence.

North Korea predictably strongly opposed the launch and threatened to counter with a missile test launch of its own. Indeed at the end of March, there were unconfirmed reports of a third DPRK short-range missile test on the west coast of the Peninsula. The Japanese Defense Agency initially fumbled this report, first announcing a test and then retracting the announcement. The information, however, was not picked up by the newly launched satellites as they will not be operational until June.

Contemplating Sanctions

The most important message, though, to take away from the satellite launch is not whether Japan is any more or less dependent on the U.S. for intelligence, but that the country is making deliberate and concerted efforts to defend itself against the threat posed by North Korea. This last point naturally raises the question of what else Japan might do if Kim Jong-il continues with more threatening behavior. Many experts predicted that with the start of the U.S. war against Iraq, that North Korea would cross any one of three "red lines": 1) reprocessing weapons-grade plutonium; 2) testing a long-range ballistic missile; 3) declaring itself a nuclear weapons state (with a test of some sort). Any of these actions would constitute an extremely grave threat to Japanese security and it is inconceivable that they would not institute some form of sanctions.

Were Japan to implement sanctions against North Korea, they would likely come in three types according to Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) officials and other experts. The first would relate to sanctions on military goods. Japan might announce an embargo on missile and arms-related exports with North Korea as well as tighten export controls on any items that might have dual-use capability. Such actions, though important if they were formally announced, would be largely symbolic as Japan does no such trade with the North and already monitors dual-use technology flows. Other sanctions in this category that would have some teeth include active Japanese participation in the interdiction of North Korean vessels suspected of carrying missiles other military-related arms. Such an interdiction effort might resemble what the United States and Spain

undertook with the North Korean freighter bound for Yemen. As a general rule this effort would be easier to accomplish on the sea rather than in the air (which would require Chinese restriction of airspace). But for Japan, the difficult issue, according to government officials, would be whether it would participate in such action absent a UN resolution calling for sanctions.

A second form of sanction would relate to a more general embargo of trade with North Korea beyond military-related goods. Government officials are careful to note that humanitarian-related goods might be exempt from such a wider embargo, but effectively Japan has already taken steps in this direction. Previously one of the largest donors to the World Food Program appeals for North Korea, Japan has since stopped all contributions from 2002. (Why do you think Kim Jong-il invited Koizumi to Pyongyang in September 2002?) Moreover, after the raid of the pro-DPRK *Chosen Soren* headquarters on Nov. 30, 2001 (see “On Track and Off Course (Again),” *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 3, No. 4, January 2002 and “The World Cup and Sports Diplomacy,” *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 4, No. 2, July 2002) and the banking scandal, Japanese authorities have maintained quiet pressure of sorts on the Ashikaga Bank to stop allowing pro-DPRK residents to send remittances back to North Korea. There are claims that such remittances are now getting to North Korea through banks in Macau, but the fact remains that the primary outlet for such activity through this privately owned bank in Japan has undergone much closer scrutiny.

A third type of sanction would involve deliberate measures to monitor and curb the activities of pro-DPRK activities in Japan. In many ways, this would be the most precedent-setting actions. During the 1970s and 1980s, despite the severest South Korean protests to crack down on the pro-DPRK groups in Japan, Tokyo refused to do so if such groups could not be proved to have engaged in illegal behavior. Even in 1974 when an assassination attempt by Mun Se Kwang, a pro-DPRK resident of Japan, against Park Chung Hee killed the South Korean president’s wife, the government of Japan refused to launch a pervasive crackdown against all *Chosen Soren* activities in violation of their civil liberties.

The likely target of such sanctions would be the ferry *Mangyongbong-92*, which runs between Niigata and Wonsan on a biweekly basis. The 1,000-ton cargo on this vessel (and the 200 passengers) in the past have not undergone the strictest scrutiny. And one would imagine that sanctions at their extreme would stop this ship, and to a lesser degree, entail detailed inventory and inspection of the cargo. Although the *Mangyongbong-92* has not been traveling regularly in winter months, it is expected to set sail again in April and officials note that there are already plans for closer surveiling of this ship. Indeed, this past quarter saw Japanese lawmakers introducing legislation to restrict, and if necessary, ban port visits by DPRK ships (meaning the *Mangyongbong-92*) suspected of illicit activities.

Another measure along these lines might entail a crackdown by domestic police authorities on the illicit activities conducted by North Koreans in drugs, human

trafficking, and counterfeiting. Japan might also restrict the activities of the “study groups” associated with the *Chosen Soren*. These groups operate underground and are composed of individuals with affiliations to the Korea Workers’ Party in the North.

Engagement with North Korea is about as welcome in Japan right now as a bull in a china shop. The public outrage at the abductions revelations still remains so high that Japanese riot police reportedly remain deployed in front of the *Chosen Soren* facilities to prevent attacks. Japanese protesters demonstrated at Niigata, the port of the *Mangyongbong-92* vessel demanding the return of the families of the five abductees currently in Japan. Beyond this past quarter, the Japanese government and public have responded with growing firmness to North Korean agitations. Firing on an intruding DPRK ship, followed by the sinking of another such ship, followed by the launch of Japan’s first military intelligence satellites are all sure signs that Japan’s postwar pacifist tradition does not exclude military actions in self-defense. Given this recent precedent, would Japan enact sanctions against the next North Korean provocation, be this a ballistic missile test or reprocessing? If one looks carefully, they already have started.

Chronology of Japan-Korea Relations January-March 2003

Jan. 7, 2003: Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) meets in Washington, D.C. The U.S., Japan, and ROK focus on the escalating nuclear crisis in North Korea and endorse an IAEA resolution mandating “serious consequences, not unlike Iraq,” if North Korea continues to pursue nuclear weapons.

Jan. 10, 2003: North Korea formally withdraws from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and ends its nuclear safeguards agreement with the IAEA in order “to protect the sovereignty of the country and the nation.”

Jan. 11, 2003: Japanese Vice FM Takeuchi and an envoy from Kim Dae-jung, Yim Sung-joon, meet in Tokyo to discuss the DPRK’s withdrawal from the NPT.

Jan. 13, 2003: Former Japanese PM Mori Yoshiro travels to Seoul and meets with ROK President Kim Dae-jung. Mori also meets with President elect Roh, and the two reaffirm the need for their countries and the U.S. to cooperate in dealing with North Korea.

Jan. 14, 2003: PM Koizumi makes a third controversial visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, honoring Japan’s war dead. While he claims the act served to “reaffirm our antiwar position,” reaction in Korea is predictably negative.

Jan. 14, 2003: Japanese Sports Minister Toyama Atsuko repeatedly uses a derogatory colonial-era abbreviation for North Korea (“hoku-sen”). The gaffe came as she welcomed the North’s notification it would send a delegation to the upcoming Winter Asian Games in Aomori Prefecture. She later issued a correction.

Jan. 15-16, 2003: FM Kawaguchi visits Seoul, meets with President Kim and President-elect Roh. ROK Foreign Minister Choi expresses deep regret over the shrine visit.

Jan. 15, 2003: Japanese protesters meet the North Korean *Mangyongbong-92* ferry at the port of Niigata, holding up a banner saying, “Give us back the families of the five,” referring to the five Japanese abducted by North Korea. Members of the pro-DPRK General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Chongnyon) argued with the protesters.

Jan. 24, 2003: Takano Toshiyuki replaces Terada Terusuke as Japan’s ambassador to Seoul. Takano assisted in drafting the 1997 U.S.-Japan Defense Guidelines that called for greater Japanese involvement in the event of a contingency on the Korean Peninsula.

Jan. 24, 2003: FM Kawaguchi and U.S. Under Secretary of State John Bolton meet in Tokyo to discuss a unified response to the nuclear crisis.

Jan. 26-28, 2003: Chyung Dai-chul heads delegation to Japan, as an envoy of President-elect Roh to discuss North Korean nuclear crisis.

Feb. 5, 2003: Controversy erupts over the French Ministry of Defense’s use of the term “East Sea” in addition to “Sea of Japan” to describe the sea between Japan and South Korea in its most recent nautical charts.

Feb. 6-9, 2003: Special envoy Chyung, senior policy adviser to President-elect Roh, holds talks with PM Koizumi on the North Korea nuclear issue.

Feb. 7, 2003: A Japanese environmental group urge the South Korean government to halt development of a wetlands area in North Jolla Province. “Because of its bio-diversity, Saemanguem is important not only in Asia, but also in the world, providing a habitat for migrant birds between Korea and Japan,” the coalition group said.

Feb. 7, 2003: Japanese LDP lawmakers initiate legislation to ban port visits by vessels engaged in espionage. In particular, the bill targets the *Mangyongbong-92* passenger and cargo ship. A Diet vote is expected in June.

Feb. 9-10, 2003: President of the opposition Democratic Party of Japan Kan Naoto and Social Democratic Party leader Doi Takako meet in Seoul with President-elect Roh. The visit was intended to warm relations following PM Koizumi’s Yasukuni Shrine visit.

Feb. 14, 2003: Japan Defense Agency head Ishiba Shigeru said Tokyo would use military force as “a self-defense measure” if it was sure North Korea planned to launch missiles against Japan.

Feb. 14, 2003: In an interview with the *Choson Ilbo*, Ambassador Takano affirms importance of strong Japanese-Korean relations in order to deal with North Korea's nuclear ambitions.

Feb. 25, 2003: Roh Moo-hyun is sworn in as the ninth president of Korea, with PM Koizumi and Secretary of State Colin Powell in attendance.

Feb. 25, 2003: North Korea launches an improved Silkworm antiship missile toward Japan. The cruise missile traveled approximately 90 km before crashing into the Sea of Japan/East Sea. Japanese officials downplayed the event, stating that the launch of the short-range missile did not violate North Korea's pledged moratorium on missile tests.

Feb. 28, 2003: PM Koizumi urges calm after North Korea restarts the 5 MW(e) nuclear reactor at Yongbyon.

March 9, 2003: North Korea launches second antiship cruise missile into the Sea of Japan.

March 10, 2003: Japanese officials downplay launch; Pyongyang had warned Tokyo of the launch several days before.

March 19, 2003: Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Fukuda Yasuo warns that North Korean provocations might cause Tokyo to abandon the Pyongyang Declaration. The September 2002 bilateral agreement sought DPRK compliance with nonproliferation agreements and normalization of relations between Japan and North Korea.

March 19, 2003: Spokesman for President Roh announces that Cho Se-hyung, the current ambassador to Japan, will be replaced.

March 20, 2003: South Korea and Japan voice support for coalition forces in the war against Saddam Hussein.

March 24, 2003: Citing the threat posed by North Korea, Tokyo Gov. Ishihara Shintaro calls for Japan to rearm to protect itself. Moreover, he advocates cutting aid to the North and calls for "revenge" against the DPRK's kidnapping of Japanese citizens.

March 25, 2003: Japanese Supreme Court rules the Japanese government is not obligated to compensate "comfort women" forced into sexual slavery during World War II, arguing that the Diet alone has authority to authorize such compensation.

March 27, 2003: In an interview with the South Korean daily *JoongAng Ilbo*, JDA head Ishiba stressed Japan has no intention of procuring nuclear weapons, even if North Korea becomes a nuclear power. Ishiba points out that Japan could be a prime target for DPRK ballistic missiles.

March 28, 2003: Japan launches the first two of four imagery satellites despite heavy criticism from Pyongyang, which threatens to abrogate its moratorium on ballistic missile tests. The electro-optical (EO) satellite has a resolution of 1 meter, and the radar satellite has a 4-meter resolution.

March 31, 2003: South Korean FM Yoon Young-kwan and his Japanese counterpart meet in Tokyo to discuss diplomatic options for defusing the North Korean nuclear crisis.

March 31, 2003: In Seoul, South's Defense Minister Cho Young-kil briefs his Japanese counterpart Ishiba on the ROK's "peace and prosperity" policy toward North Korea. Ishiba supported the new attempt at engagement, and forswore a unilateral Japanese strike against DPRK nuclear or missile facilities.