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Japan's Post-Cold War North Korea Policy: Hedging toward Autonomy?

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Japan's policy toward North Korea in the post-Cold War era can be understood in the context of a general desire to increase its influence vis-à-vis competitors in Asia such as China and Russia while enhancing its own capacity for autonomous action within the confines of its postwar security relationship with the United States (and to a much lesser extent the Republic of Korea [ROK]). With little at stake in North Korea economically, Japan's pursuit of better diplomatic relations with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the early 1990s aimed primarily at securing its economic and political influence in the future development of a united Korean Peninsula by putting to rest a legacy of historical animosity.

Japan's interest in the security aspect of the relationship with North Korea was low until the 1994 nuclear crisis (and U.S. dissatisfaction with Japan's response) forced Japan to toughen its stance and take steps to strengthen the alliance. The North Korean launch of a Taepodong rocket in 1998, along with increasing media coverage of Japanese missing persons reported to have been abducted in the mid-1970s by North Korean agents, broadened support for a hard-line policy toward the DPRK inside Japan. Japan's defense procurement strategy shifted incrementally toward greater military power projection capability, in part at least as a hedge against North Korean intransigence on the nuclear, missile and abduction issues.

Ironically, policy shifts in the United States and South Korea in the late 1990s that made engagement a top priority left Japan once again the odd man out when it shifted to a hard-line position following Taepodong. Diverging views between Japan, the United States and South Korea on the North Korean military threat contributed to Tokyo's desire to increase its defense capability, in part as a hedge against being pressured by the United States to normalize relations with North Korea on terms Tokyo might view as unfavorable. Of special concern to Tokyo are the one hundred or more Nodong missiles North Korea has deployed that are capable of reaching Japan's major cities.

Japan continues to utilize both diplomacy—as in the historical Koizumi-Kim summit meeting in September 2002—as well as an incremental arms buildup to secure its leverage in the peninsula while preventing any player in the region from forcing its will on Tokyo. In this sense, Japan's North Korea policy can be characterized as hedging toward autonomy.

Cold War Era: Japan Pursues Limited Engagement with the DPRK

Prior to normalization with South Korea in 1965, Japan had already initiated trade relations with North Korea in 1961.¹ Though of a limited nature, the establishment of trade relations with North Korea presaged the approach Japan would take in its postwar diplomacy toward the peninsula. Trade with North Korea fell under a policy known as *seikei bunri*, or separating political and economic issues, which was developed during the administration of Hayato Ikeda. Under the policy Japan prioritized its relations with the “free world nations” but at the same time strove to widen trade relations with Communist countries to promote high-speed economic growth at home.²

Japan was hesitant to become heavily involved in the North-South conflict and attempted to follow a strategy of keeping equidistance between the two countries whenever possible. This strategy became harder to maintain as the United States attempted to lessen its military burden in Asia, putting increasing pressure on Japan to support South Korea in containing the North. Thus, in the Nixon-Sato communiqué of 1969 (in conjunction with Japan's efforts to obtain the return of Okinawa), Prime Minister Eisaku Sato was pressed to state that, “the security of the Republic of Korea is essential to Japan's own security.”³

The significance of the Korea clause, as it became known, was short lived. President Nixon's surprise visit to China in 1971 and the onset of détente led quickly to Sino-Japanese rapprochement in 1972. The so-called “Nixon shock” left a deep imprint upon Japan's long-term policy outlook toward the Korean Peninsula. The strengthening of Japan's “two Koreas” policy under Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka soon followed Japan's rapprochement with China. Tanaka's statement that, “Japan cannot help but recognize that there exists [sic] two

Koreas on the Korean Peninsula and the co-existence of the two is the diplomatic goal we desire” became the linchpin for Japan’s policy on the peninsula until the late 1980s.⁴

The South Korean government did not look favorably on Japan’s two Koreas policy, nor the fact that increases in Japan’s North Korean ties tended to coincide with periods of deterioration in Japan-South Korean relations.⁵ In conjunction with recurrent flare-ups over historical issues connected to Japan’s colonization of Korea, Japan’s two Koreas policy became a major source of friction between South Korea and Japan. While resisting North Korean demands that it renounce diplomatic recognition of South Korea, Japan fostered increasing informal ties (mainly through members of the Japan Socialist Party) with Pyongyang during the 1970s.

North Korean terrorist activity against South Korea in the 1980s, especially the Rangoon bombing of 1983 and the destruction of the KAL airliner off the coast of Burma in November 1987, eventually compelled Japan to impose diplomatic sanctions against North Korea.⁶ It was not until after South Korean President Roh Tae Woo’s landmark July 1988 declaration of support for other countries to open political relations with Pyongyang that Japan’s desire to pursue diplomatic relations with North Korea became possible.⁷

End of the Cold War Opens Path for Japan-DPRK Normalization

President Roh’s new attitude toward the North came in conjunction with his own policy of *Nordpolitik*. With the Cold War coming to an end, South Korea attempted to apply increasing diplomatic pressure on the North by seeking accommodation with its two largest benefactors. In this context neither Beijing nor Moscow could any longer afford to ignore South Korea, a rising economic power in the region. Pyongyang lost much of the support it had been receiving from Moscow, and its relationship with Beijing cooled. North Korea then began to look to Japan as a means of balancing the South Korean diplomatic offensive, while Japan saw an opportunity to increase its own leverage in the peninsula versus China and Russia. North Korea was in need of large infusions of cash and technology, and Japan had both.

In January 1989 the Japanese Foreign Ministry issued a statement indicating that Japan did not maintain a hostile policy toward North Korea and that Japan was prepared to “enter into discussions of any type with North Korea on the entire range of peninsula issues with no preconditions whatsoever.”⁸ This sentiment was reiterated two months later by Prime Minister Takeshita Noboru during a budget committee meeting in the House of Representatives. Secret diplomatic contacts between Japan and North Korea then resumed. Deputy Director-General of the Asian Bureau Yutaka Kawashima met with North Koreans in Paris in March 1990. Two more sessions between Japanese and North Korean diplomats took place in Japan during July of that year.⁹

Thus, when a delegation of Japanese politicians from the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Japan Socialist Party (JSP) led by Deputy Prime Minister Kanemaru Shin visited Pyongyang from September 24 through 28, 1990, it was part of a calculated effort by the Japanese government to achieve a breakthrough in diplomatic relations with North Korea. Though it is true that Kanemaru advanced the negotiations further than the Japanese Foreign Ministry had anticipated, there can be little doubt that this initial move toward diplomatic relations with North Korea was part of a plan by Tokyo to gain greater foreign policy autonomy from Seoul and Washington, neither of which was consulted beforehand.¹⁰

Japan-DPRK Normalization Negotiations: The Early Rounds, 1991–1992

When Shin Kanemaru led his delegation into Pyongyang in September 1990 the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) expected he would negotiate the release of two Japanese fishermen who had been held on espionage charges by North Korea since 1983 and begin the general process of reconciling historical grievances between the two countries. At the peak of its postwar economic power, Japan sought to douse one of the last fires of its military imperialist legacy and open a path for greater political influence in the region. Though normalization with both South Korea and China was still a work in progress, North Korea stood out as a special challenge given that its leadership had defined its own legitimacy unequivocally in terms of opposition to Japanese colonial oppression. In addition, with the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, all of the major powers in the region had begun to seriously consider the prospect of reunification of the Korean Peninsula. Japan was not sanguine about the possibility of a reunited Korea that included people still vehemently hostile to Japanese influence.

As it turned out, North Korean leader Kim Il Sung was prepared to go much further in establishing diplomatic relations than the Japanese Foreign Ministry had anticipated, and Kanemaru willingly exploited Kim Il Sung's opening in an attempt to gain greater control over policy and the financial kickbacks from Japanese companies involved in managing the billions of dollars in reparations expected to flow into North Korea once full normalization occurred.¹¹ A Three-Party Declaration between the LDP, JSP and Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) signed on September 28 urged the two governments to initiate negotiations in November 1990 for the establishment of diplomatic relations at the earliest possible date. The declaration also called for Japan to "fully and officially apologize and compensate" North Korea for "the enormous misfortunes and misery imposed on the Korean people for 36 years and the losses inflicted on the Korean people in the ensuing 45 years."¹²

News of the Three-Party Declaration set off alarm bells in Seoul and Washington. The South Koreans, despite having previously given the go-ahead for other countries to pursue relations with North Korea, were not prepared to see Japan move forward at such a rapid pace. Seoul was particularly concerned that the large amount of reparations Kanemaru promised would impinge on its own negotiations with the North.¹³ United States Ambassador to Japan Michael Armacost requested a meeting with Kanemaru on October 7 in which he stressed Washington's concerns that financial aid might be used for nuclear development programs and requested that inspection of North Korean nuclear facilities by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) become a precondition in future normalization talks.¹⁴

The issue of compensating North Korea for the period *after* the end of the war drew the most fire back in Tokyo and gave MOFA the leverage it needed to wrest control of policy back from the politicians. Kanemaru was forced to make an apology to the South Korean leadership as MOFA emphasized the need to regain the trust of Japan's allies by slowing the pace of reconciliation. Tokyo thus announced four principles that would guide Japan's normalization policy: 1) Japan would conduct negotiations with a view toward enhancing the peace and stability of the entire Korean Peninsula; 2) Japan-DPRK normalization would not occur at the expense of friendly relations between Japan and the ROK; 3) While responding to property claims arising from Japan's thirty-six-year colonial rule, Japan would not compensate North Korea for the postwar period; 4) North Korea's acceptance of IAEA inspections of nuclear facilities is important to Japan's national security.¹⁵ These negotiating principles corresponded directly with demands that the United States made of Japan on October 15, 1990 and put Japan's policy back into harmony with that of the ROK.¹⁶

Subsequently, eight rounds of normalization talks were then held between January 1991 and November 1992, in which Japan stuck to its new negotiating principles and North Korea insisted on Japan living up to the earlier Three-Party Declaration. North Korea protested Japanese demands for IAEA inspections of its nuclear facilities, and the talks eventually broke down over a Japanese request for information on a missing Japanese woman by the name of Taguchi Yaeko (known in Korean as Lee Un-hye). The North Koreans viewed this issue and Japan's request for visitation rights for Japanese wives of North Korean men (who had repatriated after the war) as mere obstructionism and began to turn their attention toward Washington, where they believed the real power to negotiate lay.

The 1994 Nuclear Crisis: Japan Unprepared

Despite the Japanese government's desire to regain the trust of the United States following the Kanemaru trip, it was not ready for the escalation of tensions that would follow the breakdown of Japan-DPRK normalization talks. As the United States began to talk of more coercive measures for bringing the DPRK into compliance with the IAEA inspection regime, Japanese leaders grew wary of being dragged into a conflict on the Korean Peninsula. This anxiety was heightened when, in May 1993, North Korea test fired a Nodong missile into the Sea of Japan and declared that any move to impose sanctions would be tantamount to a declaration of war. Japanese Prime Minister Miyazaki, seeking to avoid further escalation and possible war, kept a lid on news of the missile test, though Deputy Cabinet Secretary Nobuo Ishihara eventually leaked it.¹⁷

As the standoff escalated, the United States began to prepare for the possibility of hostilities, calling on its alliance partner Japan for support. In addition to the use of U.S. bases in Japan as a staging area for military forces to be deployed in Korea, the United States requested various forms of rear area logistical support from Japan, including intelligence gathering, facilities for repairing warships and the use of Japan's civilian harbors and airports. The United States was also hopeful of gaining SDF participation in a naval blockade in the event of the imposition of sanctions and the dispatch of minesweepers to Korean waters.¹⁸

The Japanese government was wholly unprepared for these developments, having no contingency legislation for support of U.S. forces outside of a direct attack on Japan itself. A study group established within the chief cabinet secretary's office considered the U.S. requests and found that while Article 6 of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty provided grounds for allowing use of the bases in Japan, the more active types of support requested by the United States would violate Japan's ban on collective self-defense.¹⁹

Even a U.S. request for help in cutting off remittances to North Korea from affiliated groups inside Japan was a source of difficulty for the Japanese government. Though the National Police and Finance Ministry reluctantly agreed to close financial institutions run by the North Korean community inside Japan, they warned that these measures would not stop all of the money flowing into Pyongyang.²⁰

When Jimmy Carter was able to broker a deal with Kim Il Sung in June 1994, Japan was largely spared a repeat of the criticism it received during the Persian Gulf War of 1991 for not contributing military forces to the coalition. Nevertheless, political leaders inside Japan were well aware that the crisis had raised doubts in Washington about the utility of the alliance and that steps would need to be taken to ensure that Japan be better prepared to assist its partner in the event of a future conflict in the region.²¹

Mending Fences: Rebuilding the Alliance

Japan's inability to provide the support expected by the United States during the 1994 nuclear crisis, combined with the prospect of future instability on the Korean Peninsula, provided impetus for reinvigorating and strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance. The process involved a revision of Japan's National Defense Program Outline (NDPO) in 1995 to include a clause stating that should a situation arise "in areas surrounding Japan" that will have an important influence on national peace and security, then Japan will take steps to deal with the problem in accordance with the constitution, by supporting UN efforts and "the smooth and effective implementation of the Japan-U.S. security arrangements."²²

In April 1996 the governments of Japan and the United States issued a Japan-U.S. Joint Declaration on Security, reconfirming the significance of the bilateral Security Treaty in the post-Cold War era. This joint declaration stated that the Japan-U.S. security arrangements "remain the cornerstone for a stable and prosperous environment for the Asia-Pacific region." The two governments announced they would review the U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation Guidelines (which were formulated in 1978 during the Cold War) and issue a new set of guidelines. Japan and the United States also signed an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) in the same month to enable Japan to provide logistical support to U.S. forces during joint U.S.-Japan exercises, UN-led peacekeeping operations and international relief efforts.²³

The Japanese government then prepared three bills for the purpose of enhancing U.S.-Japan defense cooperation. The related bills were submitted April 28, 1998 and consisted of three elements: (1) a bill to ensure safety in situations in areas surrounding Japan, which defines the kind of rear-area support to be offered to U.S. forces; (2) a bill to revise the Self-Defense Force (SDF) Law so that, in rescuing Japanese nationals abroad, it would be possible to use SDF transport ships and destroyers in addition to transport planes, which are permitted now; and (3) a bill to revise the ACSA to enable Japan to provide logistical support for contingencies in "areas surrounding Japan that have an important influence on Japan's peace and security." The bills passed into law in May 1999, permitting Japan to cooperate with the United States in those areas it had been unable to commit to during the nuclear crisis in 1994.

While rebuilding confidence in its military relationship with the United States, Japan also supported American diplomacy following the signing of the Agreed Framework in Geneva on October 1994. Despite initial reluctance among hard-liners within the LDP, Japan agreed to give financial support to the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) in early 1995 for the construction of two light water reactors (LWR) in North Korea that would produce far less weapons-grade plutonium than that produced by the country's existing graphite-moderated nuclear reactors. MOFA was able to build support for Japanese participation in KEDO by arguing that it was the best way for Japan to increase its role in confronting the North Korean nuclear threat. In the end, Japan pledged to cover about 20 percent of the reactors' cost, estimated at about \$800 million.²⁴

Striving to Keep the Diplomatic Pace

After having come to an agreement with the United States on the nuclear issue, North Korea turned its sights back to Japan as a source of sorely needed capital and technology. Japan, while intent on rebuilding trust in the alliance, also feared being left behind Washington and Seoul in establishing a diplomatic foothold in Pyongyang.²⁵ Under Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama (a socialist and long-time advocate of improving relations with the DPRK), Japan made an attempt to restart normalization talks.

On March 28, 1995 members of the three parties of the governing coalition (the LDP, Sakigake, and the Socialist Democratic Party of Japan [SDPJ]) visited Pyongyang and signed an agreement with WPK to reopen normalization talks without any preconditions. Reports out of Washington and Seoul signaled that neither of Japan's trilateral partners was particularly happy about Japan's new initiative.²⁶ The trip was also sharply criticized in the Japanese media, which remained skeptical of political adventurism in North Korea. Though the trip yielded few tangible results, a four-part joint statement issued at the meeting signaled a new understanding on the reparations issue. The second part of the statement referred simply to the need to solve outstanding problems related to Japan's past, with no specific mention of postwar developments. In this manner, the issue of postwar reparations cited in the Three-Party Declaration of 1990 was effectively removed as an obstacle to diplomatic normalization.²⁷ A few months later Japan announced it would give North Korea five hundred thousand tons in food aid. In September of 1995 Prime Minister Murayama formally announced his intention to seek the normalization of relations with North Korea.

South Korea's strong opposition to the policy became a major constraint. Prime Minister Murayama attempted to downplay these concerns by promising once again to link the pace of normalization talks with Pyongyang to the progress in inter-Korean dialogue at a summit meeting held with South Korean President Kim Young-Sam in November 1995.²⁸ Murayama was, however, unable to move forward with normalization talks before the more cautious Ryutaro Hashimoto replaced him in January 1996.

Japan's fear of having its interests on the peninsula left behind was reinforced in April 1996 when the idea of four-party talks between the United States, South Korea, North Korea and China were proposed at a meeting between U.S. President Bill Clinton and South Korean leader Kim Young-Sam. Though ostensibly aimed at replacing the forty-year-old armistice agreement with a workable peace treaty, the talks were widely recognized as an attempt to jump-start inter-Korean dialogue, which had not progressed despite the conclusion of the Agreed Framework.

Japanese leaders gave public support to the four-party talks but began to fear that financial support for KEDO had not bought Japan any leverage in diplomacy on the peninsula. Thus, Japan began making preparations for another round of bilateral talks with North Korea. In January 1997 Prime Minister Hashimoto agreed to proceed slowly with talks after being warned by South Korean President Kim Young-Sam that a new round of Japan-DPRK talks might complicate the four-party talks.

While cautious to maintain the goodwill of the South Koreans, senior officials inside MOFA remained adamant that Japan retain its own place for negotiating with North Korea and engage actively in the problems of the Korean Peninsula.²⁹ In May and August of 1997 preliminary talks were held in which Japan reportedly sought to maximize cooperation by focusing on one of the least problematic issues: the return visits of Japanese wives. Though Japan desired the return of all housewives of Japanese nationality—assumed to number about 1,800—North Korea allowed only two small groups to return to Japan in November 1997 and early 1998. However, the prospects for resuming talks fizzled again when Japanese public opinion reacted negatively to the behavior of the visiting wives and an announcement from Pyongyang that none of the missing Japanese citizens thought to have been kidnapped were residing in North Korea. In June 1998 Vice Foreign Minister Shunji Yanai stated that Japan was unlikely to resume talks with North Korea unless some clues could be obtained about the missing Japanese.³⁰

The Taepodong Launch and Japanese Hedging

With Japan unwilling to move forward on normalization talks despite the return visit of the Japanese wives, North Korea determined to up the ante again in August 1998 with the test launch of a Taepodong rocket, which traversed northern Japan before falling into the Pacific Ocean. Negative sentiment toward North Korea that had been gaining momentum in Japan over the abduction issue increased substantially following the incident. The Japanese government immediately condemned the test as a “very dangerous act” that “could not be tolerated.” In addition, Japan announced it would freeze all food aid to North Korea, withhold contributions to KEDO, and withdraw its offer to pursue talks aimed at normalization of relations.³¹

Japan's decision to withhold its contributions to KEDO exposed the vulnerability of trilateral coordination between Japan, the United States and South Korea. Despite efforts to rebuild trust in the alliance, Japan was not able to convince either the United States or South Korea to adopt a harder line toward North Korea following the Taepodong launch. On the South Korean side, the ascendance of Kim Dae Jung to the presidency in 1998 had given strong impetus to an engagement policy toward North Korea, while the Clinton administration's insistence upon maintaining the Agreed Framework and pursuing four-party talks prompted another mini crisis in U.S.-Japan security cooperation. Washington not only refused to postpone implementation of the cost-sharing agreement under KEDO but also sought to try and accelerate the LWR schedule in exchange for a North Korean commitment to discuss the missile issue.³²

A standoff between Japan and the United States over support for KEDO ended with the Japanese backing down. Without any real alternatives to maintaining trilateral cooperation, Japan moved to improve its military relationships with South Korea and the United States. In October 1998 Japan issued a joint declaration with the South Korean government in which the two governments pledged greater security cooperation, including increased defense exchanges and consultations. The missile launch also helped push through legislation to support the revised U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation Guidelines and gave momentum to a movement to establish laws to prepare Japan for emergencies involving military confrontation. Japan also resolved in August 1999 to participate in a joint research program on Theatre Missile Defense (TMD) with the United States.

While working to ensure better trilateral security cooperation, Japan also signaled to Washington that it would aim to take greater control over its own security in the future. As Michael Green has indicated, “Japan's hedging was not only aimed at North Korea... Many inside MOFA were dissatisfied with a perceived lag in U.S. intelligence sharing on the missile launch and the signs that Washington might take the Taepodong threat less seriously than Tokyo did.”³³ Japan was particularly disappointed that Washington had sided with the North Koreans in classifying the event as a satellite launch rather than a missile test, despite the fact that the Taepodong rocket was fully capable of carrying a warhead in the future. Japan therefore determined to enhance its own intelligence-gathering capabilities and announced it would develop an indigenous surveillance satellite system in November 1998.

Further steps were taken to signal Japan's new proactive stance toward North Korea in the following years. After North Korean spy ships entered upon Japanese territorial waters in the spring of 1999, the Obuchi cabinet gave authorization for the Japanese Marine Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) to fire at intruding North Korean spy ships in the future. Among the most controversial steps taken to increase Japan's independent defense capability vis-à-vis North Korea following Taepodong was the decision to introduce airborne refueling planes to the Japanese Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF). By extending the range of Japan's F-2 and F-16 fighter planes, the refueling tankers, once deployed, would give Japan the capability to directly attack military bases inside North Korea.³⁴

U.S.-DPRK missile talks, which were given priority following the Taepodong launch, did little to assuage Tokyo's growing suspicion that its support for KEDO and the four-party talks was not sufficient to reduce the North Korean security threat to Japan. MOFA officials' support for the process was undermined when the September 1999 Berlin agreement centered upon DPRK missile exports and a halt to further development of long-range missiles (which may be capable of threatening the United States), without addressing the estimated one hundred Nodong missiles already deployed inside North Korea that are capable of reaching most large cities in Japan.³⁵

Behind some of Tokyo's apprehension was the fear that President Clinton would move abruptly to normalize relations with the North Koreans prior to the end of his second term.³⁶ Such a move would put enormous pressure on Japan to proceed with normalization, while undermining its ability to successfully negotiate with North Korea on issues of particular interest to Japan, such as medium-range missiles and missing Japanese nationals. Thus, while welcoming North Korea's pledge to freeze missile launches, Japan set about making preparations for a new round of bilateral talks.

Japan-DPRK Normalization Talks Resume

When a delegation led by former Prime Minister Murayama was dispatched to Pyongyang in December 1999 to restart talks, circumstances on both sides had changed considerably. The North Koreans were on a better footing with both the South Koreans and the United States, and had also won the blessing of Chinese leader Jiang Zemin for their foreign policy initiative aimed at normalizing relations with the nations of the Western world. In contrast, Japanese public sentiment toward North Korea had hardened and Japan's military activism was on the rise. On August 10, 1999, the North Korean government demonstrated its concern regarding this trend when it issued a policy statement on relations with Japan. Whereas previous North Korean policy statements had focused on the need for Japan to provide financial compensation to North Korea, the new policy identified "obtaining a guarantee for the Kim Jong Il regime" and "easing the military threat from Japan" as key objectives.³⁷

The Japanese, for their part, were taking a more sober approach to talks than in the early 1990s. While hoping to build upon the goodwill established when South Korean leader Kim Dae Jung visited Tokyo in 1998, the Japanese were not racing to take advantage of Seoul's newfound desire for Japan-North Korean reconciliation. Beyond the public's increasing attention to the abduction issue, North Korea's ability to develop both nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles capable of traversing the Japanese archipelago had changed the equation considerably, making the removal of a direct military threat a primary objective of Japanese diplomacy.³⁸

The ninth round of Japan-DPRK normalization talks was held in Beijing on April 4–8, 2000. According to Japanese Foreign Minister Yohei Kono, the negotiations would cover "all issues of interest to both nations," the two matters of most concern to Japan being the North Korean missile development program and the alleged abduction of ten Japanese nationals by North Korean agents.³⁹ In the ninth round both sides laid out a full range of issues to be dealt with. North Korea demanded a written, legally binding apology backed by reparations, including damages for stolen cultural artifacts and an assurance of the legal status of pro-Pyongyang Koreans living in Japan. Japan raised the issue of North Korea's missile and nuclear development programs, the abduction issue and new concerns over North Korean spy ships and drug trafficking.

Although the ninth round did not yield many tangible results, hopes for improved relations remained high following the successful North-South summit talks in Pyongyang on June 13–15, 2000. At the first-ever meeting of

Japanese and North Korean foreign ministers during the July 26 ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Bangkok, Foreign Minister Kono and his North Korean counterpart Paek Nam-sun agreed to a tenth round of talks in Tokyo on August 21–24.

As the tenth round of talks got underway, Ambassador Takano acknowledged recent positive developments on the Korean Peninsula, but again reiterated the importance of settling issues surrounding North Korea's missile development and the alleged abductions of Japanese nationals "in a way that will gain acceptance by the Japanese nation."⁴⁰ Though both sides repeated their previous positions, some small developments could be observed. During the talks in Tokyo, North Korean negotiators agreed to consider the Japanese proposal to provide "economic assistance" rather than "reparations" for past wrongs committed during Japan's colonial rule of Korea. North Korea also indicated it would continue its search for the "missing Japanese."⁴¹

While no major breakthroughs were made, the tenth round of talks ended on a more positive note than did previous negotiations, with the joint communiqué encouraging exchanges between diplomats, businessmen and citizens to promote "the early establishment of friendly relations between the two countries."⁴² The two sides also agreed to meet for an eleventh round of talks in a third country (China) in late October 2000.

Expectations were high on the eve of the eleventh round of normalization negotiations for a variety of reasons. On October 6 a report surfaced indicating that at the advice of South Korean leader Kim Dae Jung, Prime Minister Mori had sent a personal letter to Kim Jong Il with a request for summit talks.⁴³ North Korea had also demonstrated its good faith by allowing a third group of Japanese wives to visit Japan in early October. The Japanese government then took the extraordinary step of announcing that it would donate five hundred thousand tons of rice to North Korea through the World Food Program (WFP).⁴⁴

At the talks Japan offered North Korea a \$9 billion "economic aid" package (60 percent in grant aid and 40 percent in loans) in return for North Korea's moderation of the missile threat and a satisfactory resolution to the abduction issue. Counter to Japanese expectations, however, the North Koreans rejected the idea of "economic assistance" and returned to their earlier demand for "reparations" tied to an apology. They also demanded that the abductions issue be discussed separately from normalization. The talks lasted only two days, no fruitful results were reported, and no date was set for future talks.⁴⁵

In attempting to explain why the mood surrounding the eleventh round of talks changed so suddenly, one cannot discount a flurry of high-level diplomatic exchanges that took place between the United States and North Korea in October 2000, just prior to the talks. On October 9, 2000 Kim Jong Il sent Vice Marshall Jo Myong Rok, the highest-ranking North Korean official ever to visit the United States, as his special envoy to Washington. Washington reciprocated later that month by sending Secretary of State Madeline Albright to Pyongyang, reportedly to clear the way for a November visit by President Clinton.

In Tokyo, suspicions were growing that the United States and North Korea might reach an agreement on the long-range missile program and move to normalize relations, while leaving the short- and medium-range missile programs (such as the Nodong) intact. The Japanese government expressed its concerns publicly following meetings of the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) in October 2000. In response Secretary of State Albright insisted that her talks with Kim Jong Il had dealt with "all kinds of missiles."⁴⁶ Still, the problem of how to settle the North Korean missile issue in a manner suitable to both Washington and Tokyo would be carried over to new administrations in both countries.

The September 2002 Japan-DPRK Summit

A change of administration in the United States provided the backdrop for a new diplomatic environment within which the North Koreans would operate in 2001. During the presidential campaign of 2000 the Bush team had already signaled that it would take a different approach to North Korea than the Clinton administration had. The North Koreans in turn shifted diplomatic efforts back toward the Japanese, floating the idea of a summit meeting as early as January 2001, soon after President Bush's inauguration.⁴⁷

Due to failing popularity at home, Prime Minister Mori was unable to build support for such a move. Diplomacy would not start again in earnest until a new administration headed by Junichiro Koizumi took power in April 2001. At the behest of the new prime minister, MOFA began a series of informal secret negotiations in the fall of 2001. Japanese negotiators aimed initially at sounding out the seriousness of the North Koreans about making a comprehensive deal that would satisfy both countries' concerns.

These talks began to yield small concessions from the North Koreans early in 2002, following President Bush's decision to include North Korea in the "axis of evil" during his State of the Union speech. In February the North Koreans agreed to release a Japanese journalist who had been detained for two years. A month later the North Korean Red Cross announced it would resume its investigation into Japanese "missing persons." In April 2002 North Korean General Secretary Kim indicated that the missing persons issue could be a topic of future bilateral discussion. These North Korean concessions opened the way for higher-level talks in July and director-general-level talks in August. At the August meeting it was determined that to summon the political will necessary to reach an agreement would require a summit meeting between the leaders of the two countries.⁴⁸

When the September summit meeting in Pyongyang was announced many observers were skeptical of the prime minister's motives, arguing either that Koizumi was hoping to divert attention from his sputtering economic reforms or that the move was aimed at placating Japanese business, which was anxious to get its hands on the lucrative contracts that might be generated by reparations payments to North Korea.⁴⁹ Others saw Koizumi playing into the North Korean strategy of building wedges between the United States and its allies.⁵⁰

Koizumi was able to thwart his Japanese critics by gaining the North Korean government's public acknowledgement that it had indeed carried out abductions of Japanese nationals. Although the public backlash over this admission caused a twelfth round of normalization discussions to fail, many foreign policy experts inside Japan believe that Koizumi's ability to extract this concession from Pyongyang made the summit successful from a diplomatic standpoint.⁵¹

When critics charge that Koizumi did not push hard enough on the nuclear issue, despite a pre-summit briefing by the United States on North Korea's secret highly enriched uranium (HEU) program, Japanese diplomats point out that the United States has itself directed negotiations with North Korea for some time with only limited results. According to MOFA official Kenji Hiramatsu, the continuation of North Korea's nuclear development, in combination with its deployment of Nodong missiles, has put Japan in a position where it "cannot remain indifferent to these problems, which bear directly on its security."⁵²

2003 Nuclear Crisis and Beyond

The Japanese public backlash that followed North Korea's stunning acknowledgement that it had indeed kidnapped ten Japanese citizens (and especially that five of these had since died) has, for the time being, rendered

further normalization negotiations next to impossible. Though the Japanese public overwhelmingly supported Prime Minister Koizumi's diplomatic efforts, the confirmation of the abductions—in combination with October 2002 revelations regarding North Korea's secret HEU nuclear program—turned Japanese sentiment strongly against proceeding with normalization negotiations.

In the new highly charged political atmosphere, Japan has taken steps to show its solidarity with Washington and to promote its own independent defensive capability. Legislation has passed in the House of Representatives that will enable the government to cut off bank remittances from North Koreans living in Japan, while the LDP is currently considering the introduction of further legislation that will ban all North Korean ships from Japanese ports for a period of six months (this would help stop the cash transfers that made up the bulk of the roughly \$120 million remitted from 2000 to 2002).⁵³ The Japanese government has also cracked down on the export of “dual use” technology following allegations in the U.S. Congress that a large percentage of North Korea missiles were actually made in Japan.

Japan has bolstered its military preparedness by passing legislation to enable the SDF to react quickly in the event of a military contingency, moved to purchase missile defense technology from the United States, and budgeted for a 16,000-ton aircraft carrier in the FY 2004 military budget.⁵⁴ This new military activism has been bolstered in the public sphere by an unprecedented level of aggressive rhetoric coming from high-ranking Japanese officials. In direct contrast to the low profile maintained by the Japanese government during the 1994 crisis, Japan has stressed its right to counterattack in the event that North Korea prepares to launch a missile attack.⁵⁵

The extent of U.S.-Japan policy convergence on North Korea may in the end depend on an internal struggle within the Japanese government. Until recently, the mainstream view within MOFA has been that North Korea intends to use its nuclear program as a diplomatic card in negotiations with Japan and the United States to obtain economic support necessary for regime survival. This view lends itself more readily to engagement with the North Koreans than does the view held by most JDA officials, who believe that North Korea is determined to develop nuclear weapons to assure its security.⁵⁶

MOFA has long promoted the idea of six-party talks to serve as a basis for future security in the region and secure increased diplomatic autonomy for Japan. At the first round of six-party talks held in September 2003, MOFA's moderates appeared to remain in control of Japan's North Korea policy. While the United States was reluctant to offer any concessions that the North Koreans might perceive as a sign of weakness, the Japanese government proposed that fuel oil supplies be resumed and that a comprehensive support framework for dealing with Pyongyang's energy needs be established in return for abandoning its nuclear weapons program, accepting IAEA inspections, and forsaking both the export and deployment of ballistic missiles.⁵⁷

As the nuclear crisis wears on, the influence of moderates inside the Japanese government may be put to the test. Pressure groups associated with families of the kidnap victims have gained enormous influence in the Japanese media, putting increasing pressure on the government to take a hard line with North Korea. The popular right-wing governor of Tokyo, Ishihara Shintaro, has gone so far as to suggest that the best way to deal with the North Koreans is to declare war.⁵⁸ Politicians and members of the Foreign Ministry responsible for carrying out diplomacy with North Korea in the past have been under attack in the media for being “soft” on North Korea, and some have even received death threats from ultra-nationalist fringe groups.⁵⁹ Under these conditions it is fast becoming political suicide in Japan to suggest that concessions be made to gain the cooperation of North Korea. This political pressure could result in jeopardizing trilateral coordination should the United States government decide to strike a deal with the North Koreans.⁶⁰

Tensions within U.S.-Japan cooperation on North Korea may be already rising to the surface. At the time of this writing, the United States has begun to consider what type of security guarantee it may offer the North Koreans at the next round of six-party talks in return for the cessation of their nuclear program. Reactions to these proposals in the Japanese media have tended to focus on the fact that the abduction issue is not being addressed. More importantly, the head of the Japanese defense academy, Masashi Nishihara, has warned that a nonaggression pact between the United States and North Korea could lead to Japan justifying the development of its own nuclear weapons. Nishihara argues that even if the North Koreans agreed to give up their nuclear weapons, they would still possess chemical and biological weapons and the missiles with which to deliver such weapons to Japan. "Facing that possibility, Tokyo could no longer rely on its alliance with Washington and thus might decide to develop its own retaliatory nuclear weapons."⁶¹

While the United States has promised to consult its alliance partners before making any proposals to North Korea regarding security guarantees, the prospects for concluding an agreement that will satisfy all of the parties involved remain distant. In the end, any agreement that neglects North Korean medium-range missiles capable of reaching Japan will ultimately ring hollow in Tokyo and could stimulate Japan to further increase its own power projection capabilities.

Conclusion

Over the past decade Japan's policy toward North Korea has evolved significantly. In the early 1990s Japan was concerned primarily with resolving historical issues that might inhibit its future political and economic influence in the peninsula, especially in a post-reunification scenario. Japan took advantage of the opportunity created by the end of the Cold War and South Korean Nordpolitik to open formal normalization talks with the North Koreans, but found that its freedom to negotiate remained severely constrained by its postwar security relationships with the United States and South Korea. This tension peaked when Japan's inability to support U.S. contingency planning during the 1994 nuclear crisis severely tested the relationship and provided impetus for a major overhaul of the alliance that culminated in the revised U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation Guidelines announced in 1997.

Ironically, as Japan's policy focus shifted to the military threat posed by North Korea, it once again found itself bumping up against the wishes of its trilateral partners, both of whom, by the end of the decade, favored engaging the North Koreans through dialogue. Underneath differences in policy priorities of the three countries lay diverging perceptions of the security threat posed by North Korea. The new tension was highlighted following the DPRK's Taepodong launch, when Japan was forced to back away from its hard-line stance toward the North Koreans.

Although the Koizumi administration has attempted to align itself closely with Washington in the current nuclear standoff, differences in threat perceptions continue to pose a challenge to trilateral coordination between the United States, Japan and South Korea. Japan has sought to minimize these differences, while at the same time taking advantage of opportunities provided by the external environment to enhance both its diplomatic and military standing in the region. Though Japan's diplomatic efforts toward North Korea have thus far achieved little overall success, the Japanese public has been prepared to support greater foreign policy activism based on the perception that real national interests are at stake. Whether increased public attention toward the North Korea issue will allow the Japanese government the flexibility it needs to maintain trilateral coordination on North Korea remains a challenge for the future.

Notes

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5. See Masao Okonogi, "The Political Dynamics of Japan-North Korea Relations," *Korea and World Affairs* (Summer 1989).
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12. Brian Bridges, *Japan and Korea in the 1990s: From Antagonism to Adjustment* (Aldershot, England: Edward Elgar, 1993), 146–47.
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15. Koh, 115.
16. Myonwoo Lee, "Japanese-North Korean Relations: Going in Circles," in Samuel S. Kim and Tai Hwan Lee, eds., *North Korea and Northeast Asia* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 98.
17. Shingo Nishimura and Tsutomu Nishioka, "Amerika no kaku wo mochikome" [Bring American Nuclear Weapons to Japan] *Voice* (April 2003), 112–13.
18. Christopher W. Hughes, *Japan's Economic Power and Security: Japan and North Korea* (London and New York: Sheffield Centre for Japanese Studies/Routledge, 1999), 93–94.
19. *Ibid.*, 94.
20. See Green, 121. Stopping the bank-initiated remittances would eliminate only a small percentage of the money being transferred from Japan to North Korea (see note 53 below).
21. Hughes, 95.
22. *Ibid.*, 191.
23. The agreement was limited to the supply of food, communications, transport and spare parts and did not include ammunition for live firing drills out of concern for Japan's prohibition on collective self-defense.
24. Green, 121.
25. Hong Nack Kim and Jack L. Hammersmith, "Japanese-North Korean Relations in the Post-Kim Il Sung Era," *Korea and World Affairs* (Winter 2000), 597.
26. David Hamilton and Masayoshi Kanabashi, "Japan's Overtures to North Korea Worry the U.S. and South Korea," *Wall Street Journal*-Eastern Edition 225, no. 64 (3 April 1995), A10.
27. See Hideshi Takesada, *Boeicho kyokan no Kita Chosen shinsou bunseki* [In-depth Analysis of North Korean Issues by a Scholar of the Japanese Defense Agency] (Tokyo: KK Bestsellers, 1998), 295. Also see Myonwoo Lee, 101.
28. Kim and Hammersmith, 598.
29. Green, 123.
30. Myonwoo Lee, 101.
31. Kim and Hammersmith, 605.
32. Green, 125.
33. *Ibid.*, 126.
34. Hajime Izumi, "Pyongyang Grasps New Realities," *Japan Quarterly* (April-June 2000), 14. Legislation passed to support the purchase of four Boeing 767s to be refitted as refueling tankers in FY 2001.
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36. Samuel S. Kim, 31.
37. Izumi, 13.
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40. Ambassador Kojiro Takano cited in Kim and Hammersmith, 614.
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