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Japan's Korea Policy: A Prisoner of History

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Preface

Throughout the post-World War Ⅱ history, Japan has looked on as a passive observer of the events happening in the Korean peninsular despite the peninsula's geographical proximity and undeniable importance for her security. Neither the outbreak nor results of the Korean War, for example, were influenced by Japan's action. She was not able to change the continuos division and conflicting relations between North (the Democratic People's Republic of Korea) and South (the Republic of Korea) Koreas either. Other major neighbors, namely the US, the former Soviet Union, and China, played more active roles and had certain responsibilities in the establishment of the peninsula's present situation. Even after the size of Japan's economy, an important potential political power source, became undeniably huge and the basic character of international system, namely the Cold War situation, was changed, this impression of Japan's passive, if not nonexistent, Korea policy has not changed much.

To be exact, Japan played no minor role in South Korea's achievement in becoming one of Newly Industrializing Economies (NIEs) through her provision of official developmental assistance (ODA) and private investment. But Japan's ODA to South Korea was often either a response to American requests for strategic aid or, by building infrastructure, a foundation by which Japanese industry advanced on the South Korean market. Therefore, if Japan contributed to the economic growth of South Korea, it was a byproduct rather than the result of a grand strategy for the peninsular.

When we turn attention to North Korea, Japan's appearance has been even less visible. She did not earnestly attempt to draw North Korean society out of its isolation. Through the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), the Japanese

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government might be playing a supporting role to prevent North Korea's nuclear weapon development if the conversion program succeeded. Japan might have saved the lives of the starving North Korean populace by providing some humanitarian food assistance. However, Japan was just one of the participating nations in these multilateral projects. Whether it was money or food, what Japan provided was not result of her own initiative but from international requests. Consequently Japan was not able to establish a diplomatic relationship with North Korea until today.

This paper explores the background of Japan's passive Korea policy after the Cold War. It is still maintained despite the drastic realignment of the international environment. This fact already implies that the international systemic explanation may not be sufficient for depicting the continuation and there may be necessary to investigate domestic (unit-level) factors. The issue is important because the gap between Japan's overwhelming economic presence in Asia and her continuous political incapability may foster serious regional problems in the long run. Why doesn't Japan's Korea policy change?

1. Japan and DPRK Nuclear Development Suspicion

In the period after the fall of Berlin Wall, Japan began her approach to North Korea with a visit of then Vice Prime Minister Shin Kanamaru in September 1990. As a representative of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party, he signed a joint declaration along with counterparts from the Japan Socialist Party and the North Korean Labor Party, in which they expressed their desire to promptly begin a dialogue for establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries. The formal diplomatic negotiations commenced on January 30th, 1991 but soon faced a deadlock. Whereas Japan admitted to her aggression during the world war Ⅱ, North Korea requested the compensation for "Japan's post-war responsibility" as well. Along with history, suspicions concerning North Korean's nuclear weapon development and Japan's demand for stricter inspections also made negotiations difficult. Finally, Japan's accusation and North Korea's denial of the kidnappings of Japanese nationals led to dissolution of the dialogue, which accurred in November 1992.[1] In addition, it has been reported that US government sources told some LDP leaders of their displeasure over Kanamaru's deep involvement in the North Korean issue.[2] The South Korean government also requested that Japan should not hasten to normalize diplomatic relations with North Korea unless Pyongyang compiled completely with the inspection request of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)[3].

The break-up in negotiations did not simply represent another episode of the continuing hostile relations between the two countries because, within a month of Kanamaru's visit, the Soviets and South Koreans made public their establishment of diplomatic relations and the normalization of the Sino-South Korean relationship followed in August, 1992.[4] By these actions, the Cold War structure, in which communist and non-communist camps vying each other, had virtually disappeared in the Korean peninsula also, What came to surface was the fact that South Korea was having ties with major neighbors while North Korea's isolation became deepened. A remaining conflict was, therefore, one between the two Korean states, not between two antagonistic camps. Thus, the international

environment surrounding the Korean peninsula was clearly shifting and it became exceedingly obvious that both Japan and North Korea were unable to cash in on it.

Tensions continued to heighten over suspicions of North Korea's nuclear weapon development when she refused the inspection of two facilities in Yongbyon and later hinted at withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) in March 1993, and from the IAEA in June 1994.[5] During the crisis of 1993-1994, Japan's response was again passive, although it is true that there wasn't much Japan could do, as the nature of the issue was largely military.

On the occasion of the Seattle conference of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in November 1993, Japan agreed with the US, South Korea, and China that North Korea's nuclear weapon development should not be allowed to continue.[6] On March 25, 1994, Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa and President Kim Young Sam asserted that the international community should be united and show a firm posture toward North Korea.[7] In order to solve the issue, international cooperation was necessary and Japan correctly joined in the effort but nothing more. There wasn't any concrete proposal offered by Japanese government to ameliorate the situation.

On April 14th in Morocco, Vice President Al Gore asked Foreign Minister Tsutomu Hata for Japan's participation in sanctions against North Korea, even if China would not join the action.[8] The Vice President's request surprised the Japanese government and newly appointed Foreign Minister Koji Kakizawa argued for the necessity of an alteration in the constitutional interpretation in order to legalize collective defense of this sort.[9] On June 6, a conference at the State Department deliberating joint action against North Korea was held among governmental officials of Japan, the US, and South Korea. The Japanese government requested that for the moment only a warning be sent in order to give North Korea some time, but agreed that she would support the US and South Korea when the sanctions were discussed in the United Nations forum.[10] During the spring and summer of 1994, the Japanese mass media often featured on-going public debates on how Japan should respond when the actual request for sanctions was submitted. It was assumed that China and/or Russia would not agree to the sanctions proposed by the Untied Nations. Therefore, the focus of the debate was whether and to what extent Japan should participate in independent sanctions along with the US and South Korea.[11] The Japanese government, in truth, wanted to avoid involvement in sanctions out of the UN framework.[12] However, it assumed Japan's participation in sanctions was inevitable with or without UN agreement.[13]

The initial steps of Japan's sanctions were understood to be (1) a prohibition of remittances principally from ethnic Koreans in Japan,[14] (2) a strict limitation of visits, and (3) a total trade embargo. If a naval blockade was actually implemented and required the participation of Japan's Self-Defense Forces, it would undoubtedly have caused a serious and intense public debate over the question of whether Japanese involvement in the military venture was constitutional. The Japanese government might have been torn between an international request and domestic pressure.

Once again the point of discussion was not how Japan could solve the nuclear-proliferation issue but how Japan should react to the development. There wasn't any

initiative on the part of Japan. The Japanese government did not have enough time nor a strong will to solve the problem or, at least, to design her own fundamental strategy toward the peninsula. In fact, during the middle of 1994, the office of Prime Minister changed from Hosokawa, to Hata, then to Murayama, and bureaucrats were required to explain the situation from the start at each occasion.

Fortunately for Japan and the rest of powers concerned, the US and North Korea finally reached an agreement at Geneva in October 1994 and the possibility of opting for military actions became somewhat remote.

2. Attitude toward KEDO

The agreed framework envisions Western construction of two modern light-water nuclear reactors in North Korea at an estimated cost of $4 to 5 billion in exchange for a freeze on the country's nuclear program.[15] More specifically, North Korea promised to halt her current graphite-moderated reactor whose plutonium could be reprocessed for atomic bombs unlike light-water type. She also guaranteed to comply with the IAEA's regular inspection requests.[16]

The Geneva agreements, however, lack a provision for an inspection to completely verify the North's past record. It was one of the points which South Korea and Japan were left discontented about in the agreed framework. While the US was largely interested in maintaining a global non-proliferation order by halting the North's nuclear program, Japan and South Korea wanted to eliminate any possibility of the North having a weapon of mass-destruction, because, if the North ever possessed one and used it, the targets would surely be South Korea and/or Japan. South Korea's President Kim Young Sam stated that even "one-half" of a nuclear weapon was unacceptable.[17] After settling the agreements, the agenda, however, shifted to how they should implement the agreement.

The Korean Peninsular Energy Development Organization (KEDO) was established in March 1995 for the purpose of constructing two light-water reactors by the year 2003.[18] KEDO is an international consortium in which South Korea, Japan, and the US are original members. New Zealand, Canada, and other states subsequently joined.[19]

The Clinton administration considered the international regime necessary in order to implement the US-North Korean agreed framework, as the US could not bear the burden of the cost to build two reactors alone. The US government most likely explained the project to the South Korean and Japanese governments before the bilateral agreement was reached. However, it can be assumed that the three countries did not discuss how the financial burden should be divided at that time. At a Congressional hearing, a state department official emphasized that the responsibility of the US was to mainly organize and lead the organization. He avoided a clarification of the US share of the financial burden.[20]

The Clinton administration initially intended to pay only for the heavy oil, which was promised to be regularly provided to the North until the completion of the new reactors' construction. But even that was not implemented smoothly. Although the promised amount was 500,000 tons at the cost of about $45 million, the US Congress approved only

$35 million, claiming that it would not support a country which did not guarantee human rights and democratic rule. Responding to the situation, North Korea hinted at the possibility of ceasing its adherence to the Geneva agreements.[21] To solve the crisis, Japan is expected to finance the shortage. But the Japanese government so far has not made any public statements. It is, however, certain that a wait-and-see tactic of this sort will not prove to be effective. Chances are that Japan might be compelled to pay the cost without her being able to set the conditions.

As for the construction of two reactors, South Korea pledged that it would pay most of the cost and Japan promised to provide $1 billion.[22] However, a delay continued to conclude a contract between the KEDO and North Korea, as the US did not clarify its share and the current monetary and financial crisis in South Korea have made the South unable to keep its promise. The US recently proposed to help South Korea but the amount is expected to be no more than a few million dollars. Facing a long postponement, North Korea complained and made extra demands for expenses to dismantle her old reactors and to construct the related facilities for the new reactors, which would increase the total cost to $7 billion.[23] Recent Asahi shinbun news told that the three countries basically agreed that, while South Korea would pay for $3.2 billion and Japan for $1 billion out of estimated total cost of $4.6 billion; the US would explore the possibility to pay the rest.[24]

There was another serious point of disagreement. Considering the fact that South Korea will bear the burden of the largest share, the South Korean government naturally demanded that South Korean standard type reactors be utilized for construction in the North. However, it soon faced opposition from North Korea. North Korea complained that the safety of the type was not fully proven.[25] Meanwhile, Japan was searching for a way to resume a direct dialogue with North Korea as the possibilities of a military confrontation appeared somewhat distant at the moment. The three ruling parties planned to send a delegation to Pyongyang. Against this intention, President Kim Young Sam warned at a summit conference with Japanese Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama that Japan should not offer the North a new diplomatic card. In short, he indicated that the Japan's move would strengthen the North Korean's position and therefore they would continue to refuse the South Korean type reactors.[26] On a different occasion, a leading South Korean politician maintained that (the Japan's and US) direct approaches “over the head” of the South would damage the tripartite relations.[27] Having realized the seriousness of the situation, the Japanese government decided to dispatch then LDP vice president and current Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi. He promised full-consultation from that point on with South Korea.[28] Obuchi also reiterated that Japan's approach would not go ahead of the progress of the North-South dialogue, which had shown little progress until then.

No one denies that Japan-South Korean relations are indispensable for Japan. On the other hand, the lack of independence in Japanese diplomacy may diminish the North's respect for Japan and the excessive “monolithic approach” of the three countries may solidify the internal unity of the North against the “capitalist and imperialist camp” instead. A fresh approach, which is not bound to the Cold War obsession, is obviously needed.

Structurally, these troubles concerning the agreed framework were mostly caused by a

gap between the US' wide-discretion at the negotiation table and its shortage of financial resources to implement the agreement. The gap should be bridged by South Korea and Japan. They, however, have not had enough opportunities to express their opinions concerning the contents. Moreover, although the public information is still very limited, the Japanese government does not appear to have made any significant proposal. It certainly did not provide a full-explanation of Japan's role in the KEDO for the Japanese public. The government's low profile seems designed to avoid wide public debates over its heavy burden in the KEDO, which could create serious political turmoil. The Japanese government once again evaded a public discussion in defining Japan's new role in the peninsula, which is in need of clarification particularly since the end of Cold War.

3. Humanitarian Food Assistance and Japan

Another significant issue in addition to the US-North Korean agreements is a serious and continuous famine in North Korea. Pyongyang hoped to resume a direct dialogue with Japan in the expectation that it would receive substantial humanitarian food assistance and, in fact, made an informal overture to Japan's ruling parties in March 1995.[29] Japan, however, promised to collaborate with the South as our discussion has previously shown. To continue negotiations with the North while satisfying the South's requests was not, of course, an easy task. In fact, the North-South Korean talks on food aid itself initially faced obstruction over whether the negotiation should be done through a hot line.[30] Subsequently, after an agreement was reached between the North and the South, Japan-North Korea official talks finally got under way on June 24th, 1995.[31] Again, it was not the Japanese foreign ministry but the ruling parties who worked behind the scenes. The government was too concerned about relations with South Korea to approach to the North directly.

However, politicians also made blunders. From May 1994 through June 1995, five cabinet class politicians, in one way or another, justified Japan's actions before and during World War Ⅱ.[32] In October, even Prime Minister Murayama, who had sincerely admitted and repeatedly apologized for Japan's wrongdoings, thoughtlessly stated that the annexation treaty between Japan and Korea of 1910 was legally concluded.[33] Moreover, the Minister of General Affairs, Takami Eto, expressed his interpretation of Japan's colonial rule by saying "Japan has done good things too" at an important moment immediately prior to an APEC summit conference in Osaka.[34]

Angrily responding to these developments in Japan, a South Korean government source hinted that President Kim Young Sam might not attend the summit.[35] On October 25, 106 South Korean Congressmen of both the ruling and opposition parties submitted a petition to abandon the 1965 Japan-South Korean normalization treaty and to conclude a new treaty which would clarify the invalidity of the annexation treaty from the moment of the signing and elicit Japan's clear apology for her invasion and harsh colonial rule.[36]

Fearing a serious disruption in Japan-South Korean relations, Prime Minister Murayama strongly encouraged Eto to resign, which he eventually did. Having judged that Japan had somehow shown sincerity, President Kim decided to visit Osaka and took part

in a bilateral summit conference with Murayama on November 18 1995. Kim Young Sam, however, procured confirmation that Japan would not provide any food assistance to the North without the consent of the South Korean government.[37] Murayama agreed with Kim, as both his and the succeeding Hashimoto administration hated to make the history of two countries a hot political and diplomatic issue again.[38]

Disagreement over food assistance existed also between South Korea and the US. The Clinton administration believed in sending enough food assistance necessary in order to prevent a sudden collapse or a military adventure by the North Korean government, which ultimately might bring a chaotic situation in the whole peninsula.[39] The South Korean government, on the other hand, estimated that the North Korean people's army had storage of food to last for six months. Therefore, it contended that there would not be violent uprisings and western countries should instead be careful that food provided would not be used to enhance the popularity of Kim Jong Il's new government.[40] In fact, the food shortage estimation by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) differed by more than one million tons from statistics taken by the South Korean government. [41] This created a difference in attitude between the US and South Korea. Including Japan, the three countries continued discussions and reached agreements at vice foreign ministerial level talks in May 1996. The contents were the followings. First, the three governments will refrain from providing substantial food assistance. Second, each country is instead free to join the humanitarian food aid effort sponsored by the United Nations.[42]

The tripartite agreement may not necessarily be wise, because aid through an international organization makes the contribution of the three countries less visible. In addition, there will not be many first hand contacts between the North Korean and the three governments' officials. That will naturally make difficult to explore the real political situation of the North as to whether there exist some groups, which support opening policy. It is desirable to have an enlightened political group when the political situation of North Korea drastically changes. Although it may not bring any instant results, a Sunshine policy will probably nurture such a group and therefore engagement instead of a North Wind policy will pay in the long run.[43]

Conclusion

Japan has learned three important historical lessons from the ashes of devastating war destruction. First, she should not challenge the hegemonic control of the world's number one power. Second, Japan should not domestically allow the rise of nationalistic militarism again. Third, she should not be too bossy toward her Asian neighbors. After World War II, Japan was basically a good student sincerely observing these lessons. She followed the lead of the US throughout the post World War II era and the new Constitution made Japanese extraterritorial military operations impossible. Japanese politicians repeatedly apologized for its wartime wrongdoings to its Asian neighbors.

However, the Japanese government observed all these lessons, because it believed they would also promote the national interests of Japan. Through following the US lead, Japan virtually did not have to worry her security. In order to keep Japan in her camp, the US

even played a mediating role between Japan and other East Asian countries. Through that process, Japan was able not only to normalize relations with them but also even to minimize the amounts of reparations, which actually were often free. Undoubtedly all of these facts contributed positively to Japan to concentrate on her own economic growth

However, observing these three historical lessons made Japanese diplomacy terribly inactive and passive. A 50 year long continuation undoubtedly made it a habit. This bureaucratic inertia was sustained by weak, if not nonexistent, political leadership in diplomacy. Yes, external influences also had something to do with the passivity of Japan's Korea policy. In fact, our discussion clarified that the United States and South Korea did not necessarily welcome Japan's diplomatic initiatives toward North Korea. They, however, had to ask for Japan's positive participation in possible sanctions against North Korea and the KEDO project. In addition, fundamental realignment of international system, namely relative decline of US power, rise of Japan's economic strength, and the end of the Cold War, basically brought a favorable environment for Japan's independent Korea policy. Therefore external factors did not always worked as constraints for Japan and they are not thus the major reason for Japan's passivity.

In discussing Japanese foreign economic policy, Kent E. Calder of Princeton university also denied that the influence of international system was the decisive factor and argued that domestic constraints were a key to understand Japan's passivity in international relations. He, however, emphasized that Japan's politico-social structure, specifically the "iron triangle" clientelistic relationship among divided bureaucrats, pressure-sensitive politicians, and parochial interest groups, made difficult to adopt decisive policy and her diplomacy reactive.[44] Our examination of Japan's Korean policy did not dismiss effects of political structure either, namely the relations between political leadership shortage and bureaucratic inertia. But the domestic political structure explanation is not sufficient at least as for Korea policy was concerned, because, even when a relatively strong political leadership existed, such as the period of Nakasone administration, passivity of Korea policy continued. Even after the Cold War period, there was not any strong policy initiative itself either by politicians or bureaucrats. So that there wasn't any necessity, for example, for the iron-triangle to obstruct such a move. Rather than the domestic political structure, a strongly built-in perception of Japan's negative role in international relations which was derived from disastrous historical experience was therefore the major reason for the long continuation of passive Korea policy.

Because of mounting international demands and rising economic power of her own, it is clear that Japan should get rid of the old clothes.[45] She should talk more frankly to the US in order to build a more mature relationship. Japanese government should also sincerely meet its war responsibilities to the Asian nations through financial and other means in order for Japan and the Asian countries to start talking the future rather than the past. Most importantly there should be frank and sober domestic public debates on the possibilities and responsibilities of Japan in the world without avoiding and shelving difficult issues. After all Japan should soon or later relieve herself from a prison called "history".

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2 Asahi, April 11, 1992.
3 Nikkei, November 14, 1991.
4 Masaru Okonogi, “Normalization necessary to be a seducer,” (Japanese) Economist, August. 11, 1992.
5 Byung-jooon Abn, “The man who would be Kim,” Foreign Affairs, November/December 1994, p. 96.
6 Mainichi, November 21, 1993.
7 Asahi, March 25, 1994.
8 Mainichi, August 14, 1994
9 Mainichi, August 14, 1994
10 Mainichi, June 6, 1994.
11 Mainichi, June 5, 1994.
12 Nikkei, February 13, 1994.
13 About an official view of Japanese Foreign Ministry, see Hitoshi Tanaka, “To verify North Korean nuclear development suspicion,” Gaiko Forum, July 1994, No. 70, pp. 59-64.
14 Marcus Noland, “Why North Korea Will Muddle Through,” Foreign Affairs, July/August 1997, p. 108.
15 Nicholas Eberstadt, ibid, p.78., Asahi, October 19, 1994, Yomiuri, March 11, 1995.
16 Byung-joon Abn, ibid., p. 102, Asahi, October 19, 1994.
17 Byung-joon Abn, ibid., pp. 101-2.
18 Yomiuri, August 4, 1997.
19 Yomiuri, March 11, 1995.
20 Asahi, January 25, 1995.
21 Mainichi, July 27, 1998.
22 Mainichi, July 27, 1998.
23 Mainichi, October 21, 1995.
24 Asahi, October 21, 1998.
25 Yomiuri, March 11, 1995.
26 Asahi, March 12, 1995.
27 Asahi, April 4, 1995, Mainichi, March 19, 1995.
28 Asahi, April 4, 1995.
29 Asahi, May 27, 1997.
30 Asahi, June 24, 1995.
31 Asahi, June 24, 1995.
32 Asahi, August 9, 1995.
33 Asahi, October 12, 1995, also Asahi, October 19, 1995.
34 Asahi, November 14, 1995.
35 Asahi, November 14, 1995.
36 Asahi, October 25, 1995.
37 Asahi, November 19, 1995.
38 Asahi, February 9, 1996.
39 A Japanese Korea specialist, Motoi Tamaki, shares the pessimistic view of the North's future by arguing that there was even an attempted coup in March, 1998. Motoi Tamaki, “North Korea at Bay” Journal of World Affairs, Vol. 46, No. 10, October 1998. (Institute of World Studies, Takuhoku University) Another expert, Kazuhiro Araki, contends that a policy for partial opening of North Korean economy obviously contradicts with adventurous military actions of last few years. They must be sought by political forces who do not share a basic view of the world. The argument implies Kim Jong Il's weak control of the North Korean state organizations. (Japanese) Economist, December 3, 1996.

40 Asahi, January 2, 1996.
41 Yomiuri, May 27, 1995.
42 Asahi, May 31, 1996.
43 Even before Kim Dae-Jung came to power, a Korean Embassy staff in Washington argued for an engagement policy. Moon Young Park, "'Lure North Korea," Foreign Policy, No. 97, Winter 1994-5, pp. 97-105. Selig Harrison, a famous American Korea expert shares the opinion. Selig S. Harrison, "Promoting a Soft Landing in Korea," Foreign Policy, No. 106, Spring 1997, pp. 57-75. For a critical evaluation of Sunshine policy, see Lee Myung Young, "Kim Dae-Jung's Stance on North Korea" Journal of World Affairs, Vol. 46, No. 10, October 1998, Institute of World Studies, Takushoku University.
44 Kent E. Calder, "Japanese Foreign Economic Policy Formation: Explaining the Reactive State," World Politics, Vol. XL, No. 4, July 1988.
45 Contrary to the author's position, a leading editor of Mainichi news paper, Chikei Shigemura, sees merits in Japan's passive Korea policy. Gaiko Forum, November 1995, No. 86, pp. 22-33.