



A Critical Test for Japan's Diplomacy

by Yoichi Funabashi

North Korea is again resorting to the "nuclear card" to shake up the United States. Pyongyang has hinted at pulling out of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and resuming operations at plutonium enrichment facilities that are tied to nuclear weapons development. Washington is countering this with various kinds of international pressure. As things stand, economic sanctions against North Korea are a very strong possibility.

When President Kim Dae-jung of South Korea visited U.S. President George W. Bush shortly after the latter was sworn in, Bush told Kim he supported the Sunshine Policy but distrusted Kim Jong-il. Kim replied that he did not trust the North Korean leader either, but he believed North and South must coexist as neighbors. This is a shared dilemma for Japan, South Korea, and the United States, and there is no escaping it if Japan is to maintain its policy of engagement with North Korea and normalize ties. Going to war with North Korea is not an option.

How should Japan proceed? For one, Japan must cooperate closer than ever with the United States and South Korea on security matters. During the North Korean nuclear threat in the early 1990s, the three nations somehow managed to stop Pyongyang's self-isolation from the international community. The 1994 Washington-Pyongyang "Agreed Framework" led to the establishment of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), and eventually the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG).

But there are inherent tensions among the three partners over North Korea. The administration of Roh Moo-hyun is to be inaugurated in Seoul in February, but a rift is becoming apparent between South Korea and the United States over their respective North Korea policies. Washington supports the normalization of Tokyo-Pyongyang ties, but is also nervous about it. When Bush heard about Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's decision to visit Pyongyang, he was overheard to note to the effect that Koizumi was a "good guy" but also an "oddball."

Pyongyang is busy with its strategic acrobatics that are calculated to widen cracks in the tripartite cooperation.

This is all the more reason why the three partners must reaffirm and consolidate their common policy. Perhaps the TCOG should be upgraded to the Cabinet ministers' level. But even then, the talks should not be limited to immediate issues, but rather focus on long-term strategic discussions. They should redefine the functions of the Japan-U.S. and South Korea-U.S. alliances to make them more effective, and coordinate matters pertaining to U.S. military capabilities and bases in the region.

The North Korean problem is made more complicated by the fact that while all are ostensibly in support of maintaining the current Kim regime, everyone is actually jockeying for influence in anticipation of the eventual Korean unification in the wake of the collapse of the Kim regime. Anti-American sentiment is surging in South Korea, in counterpoint to the growing suspicions in America about South Korea's future intentions. In a way, this phenomenon foreshadows an eventual power struggle between the United States and China over the Korean Peninsula and the future of the alliances after Korean unification.

But Japan, South Korea, and the United States must turn the present nuclear crisis to their own advantage and reinforce their security cooperation to establish long-term security on the Korean Peninsula.

Another thing Japan should do is explore how best to "revive" KEDO. In retaliation against North Korea's continuation of its nuclear weapons development program, KEDO in November suspended its heavy oil shipments promised under the 1994 agreement. If this situation continues, KEDO will simply fall apart.

But supplying energy to North Korea is not KEDO's only task. KEDO also provides a multilateral framework for the maintenance of security on the Korean Peninsula. Handled properly, KEDO could be quite useful.

On the premise that Pyongyang agrees to throw out its nuclear program, I suggest getting China and Russia to participate in KEDO, so that a more powerful international agency could be created to support North Korea's energy needs. The new organization could be named KEDO II.

Naturally, this must never come across as a "reward" for North Korea's violation of the 1994 agreement. I stress that North Korea must first promise to end its nuclear program immediately. And only after this has been confirmed by Japan, South Korea, the United States, Russia, and China should the energy aid begin.

Russia supports the Kim regime and KEDO's continuation. This is all the more reason for Russia to participate directly in the program and supply heavy oil to North Korea.

China has been helping North Korea with its own food and energy aid program. I believe now is the time for China to go the extra distance to help create a multilateral framework for the de-nuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. If China is agreeable to this, the security cooperation among the United States, Japan, and South Korea could proceed in tandem with China's cooperation. This should help "civilize" the process of international politics over the Korean Peninsula and prevent

the process from turning into a raw power game among the big nations.

Lately, China seems to have become increasingly critical of North Korea. A researcher at a Chinese think tank told me recently, "Beijing is deeply upset with Kim Jong-il for his nuclear development and the creation of special regions near the Chinese border. Beijing has had enough of Kim's waywardness."

Washington hopes the new post-Sept. 11 China-U.S. relationship will encourage the Chinese leadership to firmly persuade Pyongyang to shape up. China, however, may drag its feet on any UN-imposed economic sanctions against North Korea. China's relations with North Korea soured when China did not oppose the 1994 UN economic sanctions. A safety net like KEDO II could come in handy for China, too.

The upgrading of KEDO to KEDO II ultimately hinges on how North Korea's "brinkmanship diplomacy" turns out – namely, whether Pyongyang would give up its "nuclear card."

Still, it should not be impossible for this concept to help expand the context of U.S.-North Korea engagement and prod the two nations toward dialogue. And such a development should help other talks (North Korea-South Korea, U.S.-Russia, and Japan-Russia) to promote stability in East Asia. In that event, these talks could be considered for inclusion in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

The third thing for Japan to do is bear firmly in mind that the North Korean nuclear and missile threats are direct threats to Japan's security. This awareness was felt acutely when Nodong and Taepodong missiles were fired in Japan's direction in 1993 and 1998, respectively.

In addition to expanded deterrence under the Japan-U.S. alliance, Japan must also reinforce its missile defense capability. Chief Cabinet Secretary Aoki Mikio said in December 1999, "If missile defense is purely defensive and if this is absolutely the only alternative open to Japan, then Japan would be perfectly within its right as a pacifist nation to develop a system on its own."

Aoki was referring to a joint development project with the United States. Washington recently announced the initial deployment of the Patriot Air and Missile Defense System from 2004 – a long-range, high-altitude, all-weather system designed to defeat advanced threats including aircraft, tactical ballistic missiles, and cruise missiles.

Japan should start looking into legal and operational issues and continue research to determine an optimum system for the nation, not excluding the introduction of the Patriot system as an option. Diplomacy should seek to normalize ties with North Korea while reinforcing the nation's defense system.

The most important thing for Japan now is to muster its diplomatic skills. Along with security talks with North Korea, Japan should also try "quiet diplomacy" to help the United States and North Korea communicate more accurately with each other by exploring where they might be able to compromise. Now that Japan has resumed normalization talks with North Korea, the process must not be wasted. Even though the abduction issue must be resolved for the relationship to be completely normal, I believe Japan's top priority agenda is not the abduction issue, but the life-and-death security issue of North Korea's nuclear and missile threats.

This is the first time in the modern history of East Asia that the interests of world powers overlap and clash so obviously over the Korean Peninsula. Japan must not pass up this opportunity to remove the North Korean nuclear threat and bring about peace and security on the Peninsula by normalizing its relationship with Pyongyang.

Does Japan have the will and ability to be a player in the creation of the future of Northeast Asia? Japan's foreign policy is being tested. The Pyongyang summit and the Pyongyang Declaration were only the first step. What matters is what Japan is going to build upon it. Never before has Japanese diplomatic initiative and sense been tested so critically.

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