

SOUTH KOREA'S SECURITY RELATIONS WITH JAPAN: A VIEW ON THE CURRENT TREND

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Recently, South Korea and Japan have significantly increased their bilateral security cooperation. They have strengthened direct military to military links, achieved a better understanding of their respective roles as allies of the United States in the event of a contingency on the Korean peninsula, and are developing ways to coordinate their handling of the North Korean threat. The emergence of North Korea as a mutual threat to South Korea and Japan has increased the incentive for improving bilateral security relations. Yet, more crucial was political leadership in Seoul and Tokyo. To be sure, the bilateral security cooperation is still underdeveloped and may prove fragile. However, their cooperative security relationship is crucial for regional security. Although some may fear that the deepening of their bilateral security ties might provoke North Korea and, more importantly, China, it can be defended as the first step toward a more comprehensive confidence-building process in East Asia.

I. Introduction

Since President Kim Dae Jung came into office, South Korea-Japan bilateral relations have improved dramatically and the two nations have significantly increased their security cooperation. Among others things, South Korea and Japan have improved direct military to military links, achieved better understanding of their respective roles as allies of the United States in the event of a contingency on the Korean peninsula, and are developing ways to coordinate their handling of the North Korean threat. We examine these bilateral security ties and the bumpy road to the present state of relations. We also offer some thoughts from, for the lack of a better description, a "liberal-constructivist" perspective on the future of these crucial relations

The key factors that have contributed to the recent improvement in security relations between South Korea and Japan are the threatening behavior of North Korea as well as the leadership of President Kim Dae Jung and his Japanese counterpart, Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo. Despite, or perhaps because of, the dilapidated state of its economy, North Korea in the post-Cold War period has become even more militant in its actions, threatening to develop nuclear weapons and testing long-range ballistic missiles capable of reaching Japan and the United States. This "mendicant militancy" has had a greater impact on Japan than South Korea. While South Korea has lived with the threat from North Korea for a long time, Japan's perception of the danger posed by North Korea has become acute only recently as the North Koreans have developed nuclear and missile capabilities to directly threaten Japan.

The militancy of North Korea, however, does not by itself account for the improved bilateral security cooperation. Political leadership as well as domestic and international factors facilitating this leadership were crucial to this development. While bilateral relations have suffered during the administration of President Kim Young Sam, limiting

security cooperation, they have improved markedly in the administration of Kim Dae Jung. Rising above difficult domestic political obstacles as well as "benefiting" from the regional economic crisis, Kim Dae Jung placed improving bilateral relations as a top priority in his political agenda. If President Kim has led in this diplomacy, his Japanese counterpart, Prime Minister Obuchi, has reciprocated, which is not necessarily an easier task.

To be sure, South Korea-Japan security relations are still underdeveloped and have weak points. The security cooperation measures underway may prove fleeting. The long-term trend in the bilateral relations appears positive, but the trajectory of the security relationship will be affected by many uncertainties and imponderables.

II. A Bumpy Road

To appreciate the recent improvement in bilateral relations that has led to increased security cooperation between South Korea and Japan, one must have some idea of what the relations have been in the past. Indeed, given their reputation for mutual distrust of each other, the increased security cooperation between South Korea and Japan may come as a surprise to many.

During the Cold War, despite many security interests South Korea and Japan shared, neither country made much of an effort to promote direct bilateral security ties. In the case of South Korea, the biggest obstacle was the strong anti-Japanese sentiment of its citizens as a legacy of the Japanese colonial era. If the policy elites in South Korea wanted some indirect Japanese contribution to South Korean defense preparedness against North Korea and its great power backers, they had to weigh this desire carefully against public sentiment and the fear of resurgent Japan.

On the Japanese side, there were complicating factors as well. In the

post-World War II period, Japan continued to have strong security concerns about the Korean peninsula. However, given the incentives as well as the disincentives of the U.S.-Japan mutual security treaty and the post-World War II transformation of Japan's "strategic culture," Japan was also reluctant to promote direct bilateral security relations.¹

The end of the Cold War, however, changed the strategic calculation on both sides. Both South Korea and Japan could no longer take the forward deployment of troops of their mutual ally, the United States, for granted, and some analysts have argued that this is the propelling force behind current improving trend in bilateral security relations.²

However, the full story is more complicated. For one, the collapse of the Soviet Union and China's new market orientation isolated North Korea, causing it to behave even more militantly to protect its failing *juche* system. Also, there are important domestic and international political factors that explain the variations in policies pursued by South Korea and Japan toward each other even as the altered strategic environment set the context for the reevaluation of the bilateral security relations

Roh Tae Woo Years

In 1987, Roh Tae Woo, an ex-general and a protege of Chun Doo

1 On Japan's "strategic culture," see Thomas U. Berger, "From Sword to Chrysanthemum: Japan's Culture of Anti-Militarism," *International Security* 17 (1993): 119-150; and, for the institutional underpinning of Japan's pacifism, see Peter J. Katzenstein and Nobuo Okawara, "Japan's National Security: Structures, Norms, and Policies," *International Security* 17 (1993): 84-118.

2 For example, Victor Cha takes the position that South Korea and Japan are cooperating on security matters because they want to reduce their mutual security concerns created by the reduction of U.S. presence in the region. Victor D. Cha, *Alignment Despite Antagonism: The United States-Korea-Japan Security Triangle* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

Hwan, won the presidential election by defeating the divided opposition which was split between the supporters of Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung. His term in office (1988-93) coincided with the transition from the Cold War era to the post-Cold War era.

Roh was an imaginative and activist foreign policy president. Taking advantage of rapid international developments as the Cold War was coming to its end, Roh established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in September 1990 and with China on August 1992. He also pursued innovated diplomacy with Japan as well, leading to new developments in South Korea-Japan security ties.

In 1990, for example, the chief of the Japan's Defense Agency made a visit to South Korea for the first time since 1979.³ In the same year, the two countries participated together for the first time in RIMPAC, a biannual multinational naval exercise involving the United States and its Pacific allies.⁴ Also, the two countries agreed to increase consultation over an "Air Defense Intercept Zone" to prevent any accidents or incidents involving the air forces of the two countries when scrambling to intercept intruders.⁵ The most notable development came in November 1991 when the two countries established high-level trilateral policy-planning talks with the United States in order to improve security coordination.⁶ They were established to deal with issues arising out of U.S. force reduction from East Asia with the Cold War coming to its end.⁷

3 Boei-cho, ed., Boei Hakusho, *Heisei 10 nen ban* [Defense of Japan 1998] (Tokyo: Okura-sho Insatsu-kyoku, 1998), p. 202.

4 *Jane's Defense Weekly*, 27 April 1991, p. 691.

5 Brian Bridges, *Japan and Korea in the 1990s: From Antagonism to Adjustment* (Hants, England: Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd., 1993), p. 55.

6 *Yonhap*, 2 November 1991.

7 In its *East Asian Strategic Initiatives* (EASI) of April 1990, the United States made a blueprint for a force reduction in East Asia to be implemented in two phases (1990-1992 and 1992-1995). The first phase reduction was completed as planned. The reduction consisted of nearly 4,800 from Japan, nearly 7,000 from South Korea, and a total withdrawal from the Philippines (nearly 15,000), bringing down the U.S. force level in the three countries to 83,640 from 109,200 in 1993. See Douglas T. Stuart and

These developments, in part, were driven by the fact that, with the thawing of Cold War tensions in the region, there were increasing concerns about South Korea and Japan's intentions toward each other in the changed strategic environment. On the part of South Korea, it had reservations about Japan's military buildup. Tellingly, in its 1990 Defense White Paper, the South Korean defense ministry stated that Japan's military buildup may be a negative factor affecting South Korea's national security.⁸

South Korea became particularly concerned when the outbreak of the Persian Gulf War led to debates in the Japanese Diet about the use of the SDF for peace-keeping operations abroad, a major change in Japan's post-World War II security policy. When the Diet began to deliberate in October 1990 on the U.N. Peace Cooperation Bill which would have allowed SDF participation in peace-keeping operations in the Persian Gulf, the South Korean foreign minister, Choi Ho Joong, expressed the concern that the dispatch of Japanese troops would be "the starting point of the remilitarization of Japan."⁹

Although the bill was rejected in November, South Korea expressed its fear again when Japan sent, after the cessation of hostilities, Maritime Self Defense Force (MSDF) minesweepers to the Persian Gulf in April 1991. In its 1991 Defense White Paper, the South Korean defense ministry depicted the SDF as being "transformed into offensive forces for the purpose of forward defense."¹⁰ This characterization brought a protest from the Japanese foreign ministry.¹¹ The Roh administration showed more restraint when the Japanese diet passed a revised U.N. Peace Cooperation Bill in June 1992 and sent military

William T. Tow, *A US Strategy for the Asia-Pacific*, ADELPHI Paper (299) (London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1995), p. 9.

8 *Japan Times*, International Weekly Edition, November 19-25, 1990.

9 *Kyodo*, October 29, 1990.

10 *Chosun Ilbo*, November 19, 1991.

11 *Chosun Ilbo*, November 19, 1991.

personnel to Cambodia in September for SDF's first U.N. peace-keeping mission.¹² However, the South Korean media was full of suspicions about Japan's "real intention."¹³

What deepened the suspicion among ordinary South Koreans was that the Japanese government appeared to be ready to respond favorably to the concerted North Korean effort to establish normal relations with Japan. Guided by Kanemaru Shin, a Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) power broker, Prime Minister Kaifu Toshiki began normalization talks between Japan and North Korea on 31 January 1991.¹⁴ Although the Japanese government kept the South Korean government briefed, since Tokyo was in the position to provide massive economic assistance to North Korea if normalization occurred, many in South Korea felt vulnerable to and resented the very real power Japan had over inter-Korean affairs.

Likewise, Japan had concerns about South Korea's evolving security interest in the post-Cold War era. Many in Japan became concerned when South Korea normalized relations with the Soviet Union in 1990 and, especially, China in 1992. With regard to South Korea-Soviet ties, some in Japan became worried that the rapidly improving relations between Seoul and Moscow might put additional pressure on the more frigid and fragile Japan-Soviet ties by giving Moscow a "South Korea card" to play against Tokyo.¹⁵ Many more were concerned when Seoul-Beijing normalization came and the South Korean press as well as other opinion leaders expressed the view that the Koreans and the Chinese could form a bloc to check the power of Japan.¹⁶

12 *Yonhap*, June 19, 1992.

13 Robert E. Bedeski, *The Transformation of South Korea* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 154.

14 *Korea Herald*, February 1, 1992.

15 Author's (Kang) interview with a Japanese diplomat. Chicago, USA. Summer of 1996.

16 Katsuhiro Kuroda, *Kankoku: Hannichi Shindoromu* [South Korea: Anti-Japan Syndrome] (Tokyo: Aki Shobou, 1995), p. 114.

Security specialists in Japan also began to take notice of the increasing military spending by South Korea and what appeared to be a new orientation in South Korean weapons acquisition. They wondered if South Korea was trying to acquire power projection capability beyond deterring North Korean attack. Indeed, South Korea was sustaining very high rates of military spending since the early 1980s, especially for its navy.¹⁷ To the Japanese, it appeared that South Korea was bent on acquiring blue-water naval capabilities with uncertain consequences for Japan.¹⁸

In the final year of the Roh administration, however, the emergence of North Korea's nuclear threat served to dampen increasing concerns on both sides about each other's long-term strategy. In fact, the emergence of North Korea as a common threat has contributed greatly to the improvement in South Korea-Japan security relations. However, the discussion below of the bilateral relations during the presidency of Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung will show that political leadership as well as domestic and international factors have impacted the trajectory of bilateral security cooperation.

The YS Years

When Kim Young Sam, a former opposition leader who joined the ruling party, became president in February 1993, he announced that his administration would seek a "future-oriented" relationship with Japan.¹⁹ Kim's assumption of the presidency marked a major turning

17 See Joseph R. Morgan, "Porpoises Among the Whales: Small Navies in Asia and the Pacific," East-West Center Special Report No. 2 (March 1994), p. 31.

18 Author's (Kang) interviews with Japanese security specialists. Tokyo, Japan. Summer of 1997.

19 Kim Young Sam, "Korea, Japan Bound to Forge Genuine Partnership With New Attitude, Vision" (Kim's address delivered before a joint session of the Japanese Diet on March 25, 1994 during his visit to Japan), *Korea Focus*, 2(2) (March -April 1994): pp. 155-159.

point in South Korea's democratization, and his new Japan policy also promised to begin a new chapter in Seoul-Tokyo diplomacy. With the North Korean nuclear program presenting a common threat, the path of cooperation between South Korea and Japan appeared bright.

In fact, there was a noticeable upturn in the quality and quantity of South Korea-Japan security cooperation. In 1993, an exchange training program between the South Korean navy and Japan's MSDF was initiated. The following year, South Korean naval vessels made their first port call in Japan, and later Japanese vessels made a reciprocating visit to South Korea. More importantly, in 1994, the annual meeting of the South Korean defense minister and the Japanese defense agency chief became institutionalized with supporting working-level talks.

Certainly, the reduction and planned reduction of U.S. military presence in East Asia continued to be an influential consideration in Seoul and Tokyo. Neither South Korea nor Japan could ignore the reality of U.S. retrenchment in the region. The more influential factor, however, was the increasing North Korean threat, particularly to Japan. Increasingly isolated and suffering from structural weaknesses in its economy, North Korea was forging ahead with its nuclear weapons and missile development programs and fine-tuning its hostile and confrontational diplomacy.

Indeed, the rising North Korean threat led to the U.S. decision in 1992 to hold off the second-phase reduction of 6,500 ground troops stationed in South Korea.²⁰ Furthermore, in September 1993, the Clinton administration made it clear in its "Bottom-up Review" that the United States would maintain its commitment to the security of South Korea and Japan and continue to station some 100,000 troops in East Asia.

South Korea and Japan's fear of North Korea reached a zenith in April 1994 when North Korea removed spent fuel rods from its nuclear reactor in Yongbyon and refused to segregate rods that could provide

20 US DOD, *A Strategic Framework for the Asian Pacific Rim* (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1992).

evidence of a weapons program.²¹ The tension was eased by Jimmy Carter's June 1994 visit to Pyongyang that led to the signing of the Agreed Framework between the United States and North Korea in October 1994.

The overall handling of the nuclear crisis was left to the United States, but the mutual North Korean threat led to heightened cooperation between South Korea and Japan during the crisis. Seoul and Tokyo consulted with each other often during the crisis.²² They talked about how to deal with North Korea. For example, South Korea was very insistent that Japan break off normalization talks with the North until the crisis was resolved, and Japan obliged. However, what is noteworthy is that they also cooperated on jointly urging the United States to employ more carrots than sticks in dealing with North Korea.

When the Agreed Framework was worked out, to the relief of Seoul and Tokyo, South Korea and Japan pledged cooperation in realizing the framework agreement. Their cooperation led to the successful launching of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), the first post-Cold War multilateral security organization in Northeast Asia, in March 1995. In December, KEDO and North Korea concluded an agreement on the provision of light-water nuclear power plants on the condition that North Korea suspend its nuclear development program, remain a signatory of the NPT and observe its agreement with the IAEA. In this arrangement, South Korea and Japan committed themselves to shoulder between them most of the cost for the construction of the power plants.

Another North Korean threat that encouraged greater security cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo was the test launch of a North

21 For a comprehensive discussion of the North Korean nuclear issue, see Young Whan Kihl and Peter Hayes, eds., *Peace and Security in Northeast Asia: The Nuclear Issue and the Korean Peninsula* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1997).

22 Author's (Kang) interviews with Japanese foreign ministry officials. Tokyo, Japan, fall of 1997.

Korean missile into the Sea of Japan (called the East Sea by the Koreans) in May 1993. This test alarmed the Japanese more than the South Koreans because it signaled that North Korea now possessed the missile capacity to reach cities in the southern half of Japan. South Koreans were not particularly alarmed by the test, but there was public outrage and panic when, in September 1996, North Korean commandos landed in South Korea after their submarine ran aground. These North Korean provocations heightened the incentive in Seoul and Tokyo to improve their security ties.

There were also important domestic political factors that impacted South Korea-Japan security relations. A change in Japan's domestic politics was one such factor. In this period, the Social Democratic Party (SDP), formally the Japan Socialist Party (JSP), suffered an electoral setback causing it to dramatically change its security policy.

The SDP had long been the largest opposition party, and, as a socialist party, it had a formal relation with North Korea's Worker's Party. Moreover, it did not recognize the legitimacy of the statehood of South Korea.²³ It advocated a strict adherence to the peace constitution and regarded the SDF as unconstitutional. It also opposed the U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty.

These policies of the SDP had long hindered Japan from developing closer strategic ties with South Korea. However, the obstructing influence of the SDP rapidly dwindled as its popularity saw a steady decline after the Cold War. Its seats in the more powerful lower house (House of Representatives) declined from 136 (out of the total seats of 512) in 1990 to 70 (out of 511) in 1993. This forced SDP to take drastic measure. In 1994, it formed a coalition government with its long time ideological adversary, the conservative LDP, with the SDP leader, Murayama Tomiichi, as the prime minister. This forced a Copernican change in the SDP party platform. It had to recognize the legality of the

23 The SDP finally recognized the Seoul-Tokyo diplomatic normalization treaty in March 1993. *Yonhap*, March 21, 1993.

SDF and expressed support for the Japan-U.S. alliance. This shift enabled Japan to improve its strategic relations with South Korea as well as the United States even under a government headed by a socialist. The barriers to greater security cooperation receded further after SDP's severe electoral setback in 1996. It won only 15 seats (out of 500) in the 1996 election.

However, there were other factors that worked against the warming trend in the bilateral security relations. Although one of Kim Young Sam's stated goals of his presidency was to build a future oriented relationship with Japan, he found it difficult to do so. To be fair, it was no fault of Kim that the 50th anniversary of Korea's liberation from Japan came during his administration. By nature, anniversaries are about remembrance, so Kim could not avoid the "history issue."

The words and actions of some Japanese leaders did not help the situation. In 1995, during his visit to South Korea and other Asian countries, Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi made the sincerest apology ever for the past Japanese wrongdoing. Unfortunately, many conservatives in his coalition government were not happy with the socialist prime minister's apology and some of them, including cabinet members, made remarks that cast doubt on the sincerity of the apology. In fact, their remarks did more damage to South Korea's perception of Japan than the Murayama's good apology achieved. The South Korean public's attitude hardened further when the "comfort women" issue regained salience after the release of a report by the U.N. Human Rights Committee in February 1996.

The heightened awareness of the unpleasant past complicated Kim Young Sam's handling of the Tokdo/Takeshima problem, potentially a far more explosive issue dividing South Korea and Japan. In 1996, a tense dispute arose over a set of islets in the Sea of Japan (or the East Sea as it is referred to by the Koreans) called Tokdo by the Koreans and Takeshima by the Japanese. The islets are under South Korean control, but Japan has kept up a routine protest of this fact since 1954. The

renewal of this dormant territorial dispute was triggered by the Japanese government. However, the Kim administration, weakened by scandals and policy failures, exacerbated the conflict, which put a damper on improving bilateral security relations.

In February 1996, Japan decided to ratify the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea and used Tokdo/Takeshima as a base point in establishing a 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ). This sparked an emotional uproar in South Korea. The motivation behind the Japanese move was complicated. On the face of it, by establishing a 200-nautical-mile EEZ, Japan was attempting to protect maritime resources, especially fish from overfishing by fishermen from South Korea, China, and Taiwan. However, there is also the fact that the LDP government, suffering from increasing electoral losses, was trying to shore up the traditional support for LDP by the Japanese fishermen.

With a general election scheduled for April 1996 approaching, the territorial dispute was perhaps too good of an opportunity for Kim Young Sam to divert public attention from his political problems—such as the suspicion that his campaign solicited illegal political contributions during the 1992 presidential elections, inter-Korea and foreign policy failures, and the sluggish state of the economy. Instead of exercising leadership to cool down emotions and calmly dealing with the Japanese, he decided to ride the crest of South Korean public anger toward Japan.

Kim made a deliberate decision to dramatize South Korea's response to Japanese claims. He went on a rhetorical offensive, saying that the nature of the Japanese had to be corrected to the core.²⁴ He promised that he would deal firmly with the Japanese. Beyond words, he took such measures as the canceling of a planned meeting with a delegation of Japan's ruling party and the ordering of a military exercise near the disputed islets on February 15, 1996.

24 Toshimitsu Shigemura, *Kankoku hodo taisetsu na kuni wa nai* [There's no country as important as South Korea] (Tokyo: Toyo Keizai Shinpo Sha, 1998), p. 189.

If Kim Young Sam overreacted, his Japanese counterpart at the time, Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro, also mishandled the problem. Hashimoto threw gasoline on the anti-Japanese flame when, in July 1997, he made an official visit to the Yasukuni Jinja, a shrine dedicated to the souls of the Japanese war dead. The visit provoked a strong outcry from South Korea as well as other East Asian nations. Although he later announced that he would not make another visit during his tenure, the damage was already done to Japan's relations with South Korea.²⁵

The management of the dispute was further complicated by the fact that the Tokdo/Takeshima problem was more than a territorial issue, but it involved domestic distributional issues. Beneath the symbolic matter of national sovereignty, there was the vexing fishery dispute. In fact, things became more complicated when the two countries began negotiating a new fisheries pact to replace the 1965 pact in May 1996. The Japanese government was under pressure from the domestic fishing industry and politicians allied with it to make a new pact favorable to Japan as soon as possible.²⁶ The South Korean government also faced pressure from South Korean fishermen whose livelihood was at stake. This made diplomatic conflict inevitable and a regular staple of the evening news for months.

The tension in the larger bilateral relationship led to the cool reaction of the Kim administration to the announcement of the new defense cooperation guidelines for the U.S.-Japan alliance in September 1997. Although South Korean security officials were well briefed by the Americans and the Japanese on the implication of the new guidelines on South Korean security, Kim and his aides voiced the usual concerns

25 Masao Kunihiro, "The decline and fall of pacifism," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 53 (1) (January-February 1997): pp. 35-39.

26 Byung Chul Koh, "Japan and Korea," in Bae Ho Hahn and Chae-Jin Lee, eds., *The Korean Peninsula and the Major Powers* (Sunnam, ROK: the Sejong Institute, 1998), p. 45.

about the revival of Japanese militarism.

Most security analysts and officials in Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul would agree that the new defense guidelines represent a positive development for the security of South Korea, not just for Japan and the United States, because the new guidelines concern crises that do not directly threaten the security of Japan.²⁷ Whereas Article 6 of the U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty limits Japan's cooperation to little more than allowing U.S. forces to use bases in Japan, the new guidelines, among other things, allow Japan to supply those forces during these crises with non-lethal material assistance as well as open civilian ports and airfields to them.

The implication of the new guidelines for a contingency on the Korean peninsula is obvious: In the event of renewed fighting in Korea, Japan would be able to assist U.S. forces fighting along side South Korean forces. Furthermore, from a political point of view, since the U.S.-Japan alliance is the foundation of America's security commitment to Northeast Asia, the strengthening of that foundation is in the long-term interest of South Korea.

Having fanned anti-Japanese sentiments as a distraction to scandals involving the government, however, the Kim administration used the new guidelines controversy to further grandstand. For example, a month after the declaration of the new guidelines, a spokesman for the South Korean defense ministry announced that South Korea "will not allow the Japanese Self-Defense Forces to operate in Korea's sovereign territory, though the revised guidelines allow Japanese troops an expanded role in case of regional conflicts."²⁸ The Kim administration made little effort to explain the significance of the new guidelines to the

27 This is the impression of the author (Kang) based on his over 50 interviews with U.S., Japanese, and South Korean security analysts and officials. Interviews conducted from October 1997 to July 1998 in Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul.

28 "South Korea Not to Allow Japanese Military Operations in Its Territory," *Korea Herald*, October 23, 1997.

public; instead, it tried to utilize its nationalistic response for domestic political purposes.

Not surprisingly, by the time Kim Young Sam left office, mired in domestic as well as foreign policy failures, the forward momentum of the bilateral security cooperation was adversely affected. In fact, by the end of 1997, the inter-government relations between South Korea and Japan were thoroughly strained. The Hashimoto government, also under severe political pressure from failed domestic policies, effectively gave up dealing with the Kim administration on outstanding bilateral issues, most notably the fishery agreement. In fact, Tokyo unilaterally abrogated the 1965 fishery pact between the two countries just before the end of Kim's presidential term.

III. Current Improvement

The remarkable improvement in bilateral relations as well as heightened security cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo achieved by the Kim Dae Jung administration stand in contrast to the mixed legacy of the Kim Young Sam administration. Although the level of threat presented by North Korea or the prospect of U.S. withdrawal from Northeast Asia did not vary much during the two administrations, the domestic and international circumstances as well as the quality of the political leadership responding to these factors made the difference.

Indeed, the leadership failures of Kim Young Sam's presidency and the "IMF crisis" brought about the election of Kim Dae Jung as the fifteenth president of South Korea in December 1997.²⁹ His election represented the first peaceful transfer of power to an opposition leader in

29 For details on the failures of Kim Young Sam's presidency and the "IMF crisis," see C.S. Eliot Kang, "*Segyehwa* Reform of the South Korean Developmental State," in Samuel S. Kim, ed., *Korea's Globalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

South Korean history. The crisis atmosphere of the South Korean economic collapse provided in the "honeymoon" phase of his administration a unique opportunity for the president to guide the country according to his vision. Envisioning a new "partnership" with Japan, Kim has made a determined effort to improve strained relations with Japan. The result is dramatically improved relations, including security relations.

To be sure, as during the Kim Young Sam Administration, the mutual security threat from North Korea is one of the key factors that have facilitated bilateral security cooperation. Remarkably, despite the famine ravaging the country, North Korea continues to provoke its neighbors.

North Korea's launching on 31 August 1998 of a rocket, which entered the stratosphere in Japanese airspace, was a defining moment in Japan's post-Cold War history. It demonstrated to the Japanese that now all Japanese cities, including Tokyo, were vulnerable to North Korean missiles. Given that the United States made public at about the same time the intelligence that North Korea might be constructing new underground facilities for nuclear weapons development near Kumchang-ni in violation of the Agreed Framework of 1994, there was a great public uproar in Japan for measures to deal with the North Korean threat. The discovery of two North Korean spy ships in Japanese territorial waters in March 1999, an incident that led to MSDF escort ships firing their guns for the first time in the post-World War II period, further heightened Japanese concerns.

The South Koreans, long living under the threat of North Korea's conventional artillery, were, once again, not as alarmed by the missile launch as were the Japanese.³⁰ However, they have become increasingly frustrated by the militant behavior of North Korea despite the

30 Much of the South Korean public, particularly those under 30 years old, lack a sense of threat from North Korean nuclear weapons and missile development efforts. See *Korea Herald*, March 20, 1999.

liberalization of South Korea's inter-Korea policy by the Kim administration. Kim Dae Jung's so-called "sunshine policy"—offering North Korea "carrots" for cooperation and opening up its economy—has not produced much tangible result. In fact, North Korean provocation, particularly armed reconnaissance, only seems to be increasing in frequency.

Despite the importance of the common North Korean threat, as it was the case during the presidency of Kim Young Sam, the improvement in bilateral security relations cannot be understood without taking into account other factors. Fortunately for Kim Dae Jung, these factors tended to facilitate foreign policy leadership rather than subvert it, producing a more favorable condition for accelerating bilateral security ties.

The Summit of October 1998

Faced with the IMF crisis, one of Kim Dae Jung's top foreign policy challenges was to repair damaged relations with Japan, a country vital to the resuscitation of the South Korean economy. Within a few months of taking office, President Kim met with Prime Minister Hashimoto in London during the April 1998 Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and discussed the need to establish a "comprehensive cooperative relationship" between the two countries. This set off a scramble in the respective governments to hammer out ways to improve bilateral ties.³¹ In May 1998, Seoul and Tokyo announced a five-point plan of action for the creation of a "New Partnership for the Twenty-first Century" to deal with the lingering historical suspicions and ill-feelings and forge new political, economic, and, notably, security ties.

In order to advance the larger relationship, however, the festering fishery problem had to be removed as an obstacle. Kim Dae Jung used

31 Author's (Kang) interviews with Japanese foreign ministry officials and South Korean diplomats. Tokyo, Japan, May 1998.

his upcoming October 1998 summit meeting with the new Japanese prime minister, Obuchi Keizo, to pressure both sides, but particularly the South Korean side, to come to an early agreement on the fishery dispute. Kim did not want the fishery dispute to cloud the atmosphere of the summit, which he hoped would dramatically advance bilateral relations. With a sense of urgency injected into the negotiation process, the two sides signed a new fishery agreement on September 25, 1998, less than two weeks before Kim arrived in Tokyo.

Kim Dae Jung's visit to Japan, as it was planned and anticipated, proved to be history-making. Throughout his visit, Kim Dae Jung lauded Japan for its prosperity and its diplomatic and security policy based on the peace constitution.³² The Japanese public was delighted to hear such praise coming from a Korean leader and was charmed by Kim's frank and sincere style. The Japanese leaders were pleasantly surprised when Kim, at the state dinner hosted by the Japanese emperor, toasted his host as *chonhwang*, a Korean word for "emperor" instead of *ilh-wang* the word for "Japanese king." This was an unprecedented, if calculated, act that demonstrated to the Japanese government and people that Kim was sincere in his desire to further bilateral relations for the sake of the future. The Japanese also took note that Kim, unlike his predecessors, did not dwell on the past Japanese misdeeds in Korea and urged a "forward-looking partnership."³³

Prime Minister Obuchi reciprocated Kim's gesture of goodwill by praising South Korea's deepening democratization and economic development. He himself showed leadership when, having achieved the needed political consensus within the ruling circle, he expressed Japan's "sincere apology" and "poignant remorse" for the misdeeds during the Japanese imperium in Korea. Of course, it was not the first time a Japanese political leader apologized, but what made Obuchi's apology historic was that it was the first time such an apology was

32 *Asahi Shimbun*, October 9, 1998.

33 *New York Times*, October 8, 1998.

included in an official document, the Joint Declaration on the New Korea-Japan Partnership for the Twenty-first Century, which was issued at the end of the summit. Unlike the Murayama's oral apology earlier, this time there were no dissenting or distracting remarks from the conservative elements in the Japanese government.

The substantive achievements of the summit and the diplomacy leading up to it and immediately following it were many. The most anticipated by the economic crisis stricken South Koreans was the agreement that Japan would extend to South Korea a \$3 billion loan, in addition to the \$1 billion loan received earlier in May, to stabilize the South Korean economy.³⁴ However, the most significant achievement of the summit for the long-term health of the bilateral relationship may prove to be the understanding the two sides achieved about their common security interests and the agreement to expand direct security cooperation between South Korea and Japan.

In the joint declaration, Kim and Obuchi acknowledged the importance of their respective alliance with the United States to regional peace and stability. They also agreed on the importance of stability on the Korean peninsula, and hence agreed on the importance of KEDO. They also expressed their concern about the North Korean missile development and agreed to expand their security cooperation. In the accompanying 43-point action plan, South Korea and Japan agreed to hold their bilateral security talks, which started on June 1998, at least once a year. They also agreed to expand the mutual visits of the defense ministers and the exchanges at other levels, and to step up military exchanges such as mutual visits of warships.³⁵

34 *Korea Herald*, October 17, 1998.

35 *21 seiki ni muketa aratana nikkans paatonaashippu no tameno koudou keikaku* [The Action Plan for the New Japan-Korea Partnership for the 21st Century. Gaimusho [the Ministry of Foreign Affairs].

Security Cooperation Measures

With the summit agreement to significantly expand direct bilateral military cooperation, a torrent of military-to-military exchanges followed. The specific nature of these measures originated from the September 1998 visit of the South Korean Defense Minister, Chun Yong-taek, to Japan when he met with Japanese leaders, including Prime Minister Obuchi and the Director General of the Defense Agency, Nukaga Fukushima, to prepare the ground for the October summit.³⁶

The armies were the first to initiate the post-summit wave of exchanges between the South Korean armed forces and the SDF. In late November 1998, the Chief of Staff for the GSDF arrived in Seoul to follow through on the agreement to increase uniform-to-uniform contact between the two countries.³⁷ General Fujinawa Yuji met with his South Korean counterpart, General Kim Dong-shin, and discussed ways that military exchanges—especially involving field-grade officers—and cooperation may be facilitated; and, in March 1999, a group of GSDF personnel—most of them company-grade officers—visited South Korea for the first ever on-the-spot training and to tour major South Korean army posts. A delegation of South Korean army officers is expected to make a reciprocating visit to Japan.³⁸

Given that South Korea and Japan are separated by water and the North Korean propensity for seaborne provocation, the first joint military exercise, however, was initiated by the navies. In February 1999, Rear Admiral Kim Mu-woong led the first ever South Korean naval delegation to Tokyo and agreed to a joint search and rescue exercise by the South Korean navy and the MSDF in the open seas off the Korean island of Cheju.³⁹ Following through on an agreement made by the

36 *Japan Times*, September 1, 1998 and *Asahi Shimbun*, September 2, 1998.

37 *Korea Herald*, November 25, 1998.

38 *Korea Herald*, March 11, 1999.

39 *Korea Herald*, February 14, 1999.

defense ministers in September 1998 that the navies should hold combined search and rescue operations on a regular basis, the naval delegations of the two countries also agreed to cooperate in submarine rescue operations. In early August 1999, the two navies conducted the planned search and rescue exercise, and more exercises of this type are to follow.

Another bilateral cooperative measure that is worth mentioning is the establishment of military-to-military hotlines. In May 1999, three hotlines were hooked up linking the South Korean defense ministry with the Japanese defense agency, the South Korean Combat Air Command with the Japanese Air Self-Defense Force (ASDF), and the South Korean Naval Operations Command with the MSDF.⁴⁰ These hotlines were agreed to when Defense Minister Chun met with Nukaga's replacement, Norota Hosei in January 1999 in Seoul.⁴¹ The two sides agreed to the necessity of the emergency hotlines because, during the June 1998 North Korean spy submarine incident, South Korean forces were unable to quickly alert Japan of the North Korean spy boat which was heading into its territorial waters.

However, the most important advance made in South Korea-Japan security relations to date is not the establishment of some hotline or joint exercise, but the understanding Seoul and Tokyo achieved about the new defense cooperation guidelines between Japan and the United States. On May 25, 1999, the Japanese Diet passed a set of bills to give substance to the new U.S.-Japan defense cooperation guidelines. Despite the progress that was made in improving bilateral relations, some South Korean commentators expressed their concern about the passage of bills. However, Kim Dae Jung made the position of his administration clear to the South Korean public.⁴² On 11 June 1999, President Kim unambiguously expressed his approval of the newly

40 *Korea Herald*, May 8, 1999.

41 *Korea Herald*, May 5, 1999.

42 *Korea Herald*, May 27, 1999.

enacted laws.⁴³

Kim Dae Jung also took another proactive step. Kim proposed that the two countries and the United States should work together to determine the scope of Japan's defense operations in South Korean territorial waters and airspace.⁴⁴ His statement was a milestone in bilateral security relations in that Seoul would permit, in principle, SDF operations in South Korean territory during an emergency triggering the application of the new guidelines. This was a remarkable development considering the cool reception given to the announcement of the new guidelines by the Kim Young Sam administration less than two years before.

Here, with regard to the crucial issue of new guidelines, Kim Dae Jung's leadership had a significant impact. Through a succession of speeches and interviews and the powerful imagery of his successful summit, not only did he give new direction to official government policy, but he helped the South Korean people to deal in a level-headed way the lingering distrust they have toward Japan.

IV. Looking to the future

Despite the improvement discussed above, South Korea-Japan bilateral ties, especially security relations, remain vulnerable. Many of the reasons that have made bilateral relations difficult since Korea's liberation from Japan remain. History cannot be erased by apology or forgiveness and territorial disputes charged with nationalistic emotions tend to be intractable. There is still the lingering unease the two countries have about each other's regional security strategy.

Furthermore, as far as the argument in this paper applies, the North Korean threat that has driven South Korea and Japan to cooperate on

43 *Yomiuri Shimbun*, June 12, 1999.

44 *Yomiuri Shimbun*, June 12, 1999.

security matters also has the potential to cause trouble in the relationship. A perception gap already exists with regard to the North Korean missile threat, and this could lead to different and conflicting national strategies to deal with North Korea. The March 1999 summit meeting in Seoul between President Kim and Prime Minister Obuchi revealed how much more the Japanese government is nervous about the North Korean missile program and prepared to take a hard-line stance toward Pyongyang than the South Korean government, which wants more forbearance toward North Korea for its "sunshine" policy to work.⁴⁵

There is also the problem that the North Korean threat is unlikely to be a permanent feature of the regional security environment. Indeed, if the regime in Pyongyang collapses and Seoul emerges as the unifier of Korea, the two countries may have different security interests vis-a-vis China. The danger exists that a future reunited Korea, "freed" from the mooring of South Korea-U.S. mutual security treaty, will try somehow to play China off against Japan.⁴⁶

Of course, leadership can make all the difference, but this is often the least predictable feature of international relations. Both Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung wanted a new "future-oriented" relationship with Japan and an improvement of security ties, yet they produced contrasting results because of their differing leadership qualities as well as the political constraints facing them. No one can predict what kind of leaders will emerge in the future and what value they will place on bilateral security cooperation.⁴⁷

However, cooperative security relations between South Korea and Japan now, and between a reunified Korea and Japan in the future, are crucial for regional security. This being the case, there are two tasks

45 *New York Times*, March 20, 1999 and *Korea Herald*, March 22, 1999.

46 For a discussion on the strategic uncertainty of Korean reunification, see C.S. Eliot Kang, "Korean Unification: Pandora's Box of Northeast Asia?" *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Fall-Winter 1996).

47 *Korea Herald*, April 18, 1999.

before South Korea and Japan. The first, more partical and doable; the second, more idealist and difficult.

First, both countries must continue to nourish their respective security ties with the United States. Second, they need to strengthen their bilateral security ties by emphasizing the common values and destiny they share as democratic capitalist states.

As even the Chinese who oppose "hegemony, alliances, and coalitions" recognize, one factor that is critical to security throughout East Asia is the continuing U.S. military presence via the South Korea-U.S. alliance and the Japan-U.S. alliance. Everyone recognizes that the region has had problems achieving a stable balance of power in the past with grave consequences. Therefore, it is critical that South Korean and Japanese leaders do their part to maintain strong alliance ties to the United States.

The second task is much more difficult and may be impossible to achieve. Nonetheless, South Korea and Japan should work with the United States to create a security community held together by common values that in turn can become the vehicle to bring in community members in a cooperative security framework. South Korea and Japan can have all the hotlines and cooperative security measures they want, but they will not do them any good if these ties are built simply on shifting interests rather than some long-term vision of common community.

Although many would find the second task unprecedented and inconsistent with the Asian experience, it would be wrong to believe that history is a trap, that human behavior is preordained or otherwise beyond the power to imagine. Certainly, the two Asian nations have a long way to go before they can reach the level of trust and cooperation found in Western Europe, but the fact is South Korea and Japan are now talking about and creating a common market, something many thought unthinkable or impossible just even a year or two ago. Improbable things do happen in history. During the late 1930s, who could have imagined the European Community bringing together the

interests of France and Germany? Who could have foreseen the durable Japan-U.S. alliance?

Besides, from a very practical point of keeping the United States engaged in Northeast Asia, the community-building strategy has merit. The trend is undeniable that, in the United States, increasingly more people critically view Washington's security commitment to East Asia as the memory of the Soviet threat fades and economic tensions increase. Many members of the U.S. policy elite believe that the geopolitical interest in preventing the rise of a hostile regional hegemon is sufficient to justify the U.S. military presence in East Asia. However, others are increasingly skeptical of the argument that the United States has to play a mediating, stabilizing role in East Asia for as long as it takes the countries in the region to learn to get along with each other.

Both the calculating and the skeptical views of the alliance underscore the necessity of laying a new political foundation for U.S.-centered Pacific alliances. Even a convinced realist will accept that the existence of democratic and capitalist Atlantic community affects how the United States should approach the balance of power on the western side of the Eurasian landmass, but they do not see the relevance of the democratic coalition strategy to the eastern side. If South Korea and Japan are to have security relations with the United States on par with America's Western European allies, they need to begin speaking the language and pursuing policies that are coincident with the strain of U.S. diplomacy that believes in a close relationship among democratic capitalist nations of the world. In U.S. domestic politics, this kind of value-based diplomacy is easier to defend in all-important electoral politics.⁴⁸

48 Dick Morris, a prominent and controversial political strategist, argues that foreign policy should be explained to the electorate by appealing to values rather than security or economic interests. See his revealing book about American electoral politics; *Behind the Oval Office: Getting Reelected Against All Odds*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Renaissance Books, 1999).

Although some may fear that the deepening of security relations between South Korea and Japan would provoke North Korea and, more importantly, China, it can be defended as the first step toward a more comprehensive confidence building process in East Asia. However, it is not an assured or even a probable thing. What is certain is that it does require more work, greater risk-taking, and longer-term vision than South Korea and Japan have exhibited thus far.