

Japan in overture toward North Korea

by Lydia Cherry

Tokyo sent its first high-level delegation to communist North Korea at the end of September, in an attempt to create a new bridge between the two parts of the divided peninsula. The move is part of an effort by Japan to take greater responsibility for solving Asian conflicts.

Such increased involvement in foreign affairs had been signaled by Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu, in a Tokyo symposium on June 25. He said that while in the past it had been "politically impossible" for Japan to play a prominent role in international issues, because the world order was based on the balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union, now the shift in international relations opens the way for Japan to step forward. "From now on Japan will go out into the world, and if there is a request from another party, we should not hesitate in meeting it," he said.

The Korean peninsula is unquestionably such a place, and as communist dictators fell from power across Eastern Europe, South Korea and Japan began discussing what to do with North Korea, knowing that "tensions on the Korean peninsula could worsen if Pyongyang is isolated," as Japanese Foreign Minister Nakayama said on Sept. 26.

The 13-member Japanese parliamentary delegation was headed by Shin Kanemaru, former deputy prime minister and a leader in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party. Accompanying the legislators were officials from the Foreign, International Trade and Industry, Transport, and Telecommunications ministries. An immediate goal of the talks, from the Japanese side, was to seek the release of two Japanese seamen detained for alleged espionage since 1983. Prime Minister Kaifu also sent a letter apologizing for the "intolerable plight and difficulties" the Korean people suffered because of Japan's colonial rule, promising reparations for this (a similar message was communicated to Seoul in the spring).

Though Kanemaru was initially seeking only to set up "liaison offices" in Tokyo and Pyongyang, he dropped this plan, he said, when North Korean leader Kim Il-Sung, whom he met with three times, proposed to move immediately to negotiate full diplomatic relations. The talks concluded with agreement on 1) permission for North Korea to use Japanese satellite communications to expand its links with the rest of the world, and 2) the opening of a regular, direct air route between Tokyo and Pyongyang.

Prime Minister Kaifu on Sept. 27 welcomed the North Korean proposal to start negotiations on full diplomatic ties as "a very welcome development." He described the visit as a historic milestone.

A controversial concession

The joint declaration signed by the North Korean and Japanese political parties included Japanese agreement to Pyongyang's claim that Japan also owes compensation for the "losses" during the 45 years that Korea has been divided, since the war. This concession initially caused quite an uproar in South Korea, as no comparable concession was ever made to Seoul.

The Japanese government has since acted to disassociate itself from the controversial concession, however. Foreign Minister Nakayama on Oct. 4 made clear that Japan's 1910-45 colonial rule of the Korean peninsula and North Korean postwar "losses," for which Pyongyang is also seeking compensation, are separate issues. The joint declaration signed by the political parties does not necessarily bind the government, the foreign minister said.

Debate over what Japan should do now is rife in Tokyo. "It would be unsettling for South Korea to see Japanese assistance flood North Korea," Yataka Kawashima, deputy director general of the foreign ministry's Asian Affairs Bureau, was quoted by the Kyodo news agency. "If the situation on the Korean peninsula becomes destabilized once again, Japan's security will directly suffer the greatest impact."

Mixed reactions

Though Seoul responded to the visit with some nervousness, on Sept. 28 a foreign ministry statement came out cautiously in favor of the North Korean proposal to Japan to begin negotiations on normalizing relations. "We view the abrupt change in North Korea's policy as basically conforming to the spirit of our July 7, 1989 declaration aimed at resolving distrust and confrontation between the South and the North." Moscow was more unreservedly positive. Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze called the visit "a clearly positive sign."

Most sour notes came from the U.S. press. In Oct. 2 coverage, the *New York Times* claims that Tokyo is reeling from "the unusual disarray in [Kaifu's] government" created by the Kanemaru trip, "raising new questions about how much he is in control of his team. The criticism comes on top of widespread negative comments about the time it is taking Mr. Kaifu to assemble an aid package for the international efforts against Iraq."

North Korean news outlets refer to the visit in positive terms, but seem convinced that Washington will sabotage the growing ties. "The United States, displeased with this, has openly revealed its intention to obstruct the normalization of the D.P.R.K.-Japan relations," said the state-controlled news service.