

Japan Reacts to North Korea's Shelling of South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island

Report from Ko Shioya in Tokyo

Faced with impasses over matters pertaining to crucial economic and diplomatic policies in the past, Japan – generally considered a “reactive” state – has often bowed to “gaiatsu” (literally “pressure from overseas”) to grudgingly implement required changes.

However, a new round of “gaiatsu” – such as China's blatant denial of Japan's sovereign territory in September and North Korea's deadly artillery shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in South Korea in November – has prompted a significant percentage of Japanese to proactively take a stern look their nation's foreign relations, with an emphasis on the strain in the U.S.-Japan security ties, as a step towards becoming a more mature nation.

Significantly, the Yeonpyeong shelling incident came on the heels of a dispute between Japan and China resulting from a violation by a Chinese fishing trawler of Japanese waters off Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea on September 7. The trawler rammed into two Japan Coast Guard patrol ships and its captain was detained on charges of violation of Japanese territorial waters and obstruction of official duties. Under mounting pressure from the Chinese government which, among others, suspended the export of rare metal, Japan subsequently released the captain without pressing charges.

Unrelated though these two incidents may seem, many thoughtful Japanese believe a common cause links the two incidents – what they regard as a perception on the part of North Korea and China of the “weakening” of the once solid U.S.-Japan alliance which constituted the cornerstone of East Asian security framework. This, these Japanese surmise, must have allowed China to assume that the U.S. is no longer fully committed to protecting Sentaku Islands under terms of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. Actually, Foreign Secretary Clinton declared to the contrary on October 30 in a meeting with her Japanese counterpart. They further believe a similar perception must have prompted North Korea to attempt to get away with the artillery shelling in late November, as well as the sinking of the South Korean navy patrol ship Cheonan in March, without U.S. involvement. In fact, Japanese observers believe North Korea has over the years been steadfastly working out a strategy under the premise that it will one day be able to fight a conventional war against South Korea minus U.S. troops – and win.

The popular sentiment here is highly critical of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) administration, but the liberal Democratic Party (LDP) which went out of power in the fall of 2009 has yet to regain enough public confidence to return to power. Japanese generally share a keen sense of crisis over the Korean Peninsula including a possible implosion of the North Korean regime, and are immensely frustrated by the inept leadership of the DPJ administration, especially in terms of its unskilled diplomacy, which has seriously impaired the U.S.-Japan security relationship as it tried in vain to develop an “equal” relationship with the United States without being able to work out any concrete policy.

The DPJ's desire to proclaim Japan “independent” from the U.S. by pursuing an “equal” relationship was evidenced in a pledge Yukio Hatoyama, the DPJ's first premier, had made while campaigning to topple the LDP government in 2009 that the Futenma U.S. Marine Air Base in Japan's southernmost Okinawa prefecture will be “at least removed” from Okinawa – contrary to an agreement reached between the U.S. and Japan in 1996 that the base will be relocated to the Henoko district in Nago city in northern Okinawa, as well as his announcement that Japan would strive to form the East Asian Community in tandem with China and excluding

the U.S.

However, the Futenma situation has since come to a standstill for the DPJ administration of Naoto Kan, who took over from Hatoyama in September. For one thing, Nago City, which had once agreed to accommodate the base, now has a new mayor adamantly opposed to the base's relocation. Meanwhile, Governor of Okinawa Hirokazu Nakaima, who had once favored the relocation plan, has had a change of mind and now wants the base removed from his prefecture.

Thoughtful Japanese believe it was against such a backdrop that the Senkaku incident and the North Korean shelling occurred, with the controversial visit to the Russian-occupied northern Japanese island of Kunashiri by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in between. Behind the spate of these incidents was a perceived weakening of the U.S.-Japan alliance which once formed the foundation of the East Asian security framework.

Japanese generally are highly critical of Hatoyama for having hurt U.S.-Japan security ties by being too eager to pursue "an equal relationship" with the U.S. There has been mounting frustration among ordinary Japanese over the inept leadership of the DPJ administration under which Japan truly lost its way in 2010 – not only diplomatically. The North Korean shelling incident has laid bare the administration's ill-preparedness to safeguard Japan's security should North Korea launch a Yeonpyeong-like attack anywhere in the Japanese archipelago, say the southernmost main island of Kyushu, depending on its precarious internal situation.

The average Japanese assumes North Korea is capable of attacking Japan with its Taepodong missiles some of which they are told are already aimed at Japan, possibly mounted with nuclear warheads when the North succeeds in developing them, and feel seriously imperiled. Fortunately, there are signs that DPJ law makers are awakening – albeit painfully slowly – to the realization that, despite Hatoyama's infatuation with the idea of "independence," Japan after all should treasure – and further – its relationship with the U.S., as well as the other free democracies in Asia, especially South Korea, Australia, and India, and that it should materially and mentally start preparing for future contingencies that may befall their nation at any time.

In fact, Japan recently announced its new defense guidelines refocusing its defense strategy on the rise of China and calling for a stronger alliance with its biggest ally, the U.S., and seeking closer security networks with partners like South Korea and Australia. The Defense Ministry has announced Japan will also acquire new submarines and fighter jets, upgrade its missile defense capabilities and make its ground forces more mobile so as to quickly respond to emergencies in southwest Japan.

The good news is also that average Japanese citizens are miles ahead of politicians in their zeal to find answers to what Japan should do as a responsible member of the Asian community in contributing to regional security and prosperity. Obviously, the Japanese are belatedly awakening to the tough reality of Asia surrounding their nation – perhaps for the first time since the end of the Pacific war. The tide in Japan appears to be finally turning for its own benefit, as well as for future stability and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific region. If all this is thanks to the recent "gaiatsu," China and North Korea – and perhaps Russia – may deserve a thank you note from the Japanese government.

Ko Shioya, born in 1940, is a veteran author/journalist who has followed his nation's international relations extensively, with a special interest in the history of Japan's diplomatic relations with the U.S. and Korea. Since leaving Bungei Shunju Ltd. a leading Japanese publisher of books and magazines for which he served as North American Bureau Chief 1994-2001, Shioya has researching the history of Japan's diplomacy with the U.S. for his next book to

discuss whether the Pacific War could have been avoided. Prior to joining Bungei Shunju Ltd., he was an Associated Press reporter and editor-in-chief of the Japanese edition of the Reader's Digest. Mr. Shioya is a PCI Board member and country representative in Japan.