

Japan's Foreign Policy Dilemma vis-à-vis North Korea

—The Nuclear Issue, the Abduction Issue, and Diplomatic Normalization—

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Introduction

The purpose of this brief paper is to outline Japan's foreign policy dilemma vis-à-vis North Korea—the nuclear issue, the abduction issue, and diplomatic normalization. These three issues are major areas where Japan and the DPRK often strongly disagree. They may look like separate issues, but they are in fact closely linked.

Former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi made a dramatic visit to Pyongyang on September 17, 2002 and held a summit meeting with Chairman Kim Jong-Il, and signed the “Japan-DPRK Pyongyang Declaration.” Koizumi visited Pyongyang again in May 2004. Since then Japan has made a continuous effort to normalize diplomatic relations with North Korea. Koizumi's two visits were a remarkable diplomatic breakthrough between Japan and the DPRK. They were extremely important for a number of reasons.

First, after long and repeated denials, Kim Jong Il officially admitted to the abduction of Japanese nationals for the very first time, creating an opening in the hard wall of the abduction issue. After Koizumi's first visit, five abductees were released and returned to Japan. After his second visit, the family members of these five abductees were al-

lowed to leave North Korea for reunions in Japan. Koizumi's two visits led to a series of subsequent negotiations on the abduction issue, that still continues to this day. These bilateral negotiations have not yet produced any new positive results, but at least North Korea, with great reluctance, agrees to discuss the abduction issue from time to time.

Second, Koizumi's visits opened a way for possible normalization of diplomatic relations with the DPRK. At present, Japan has diplomatic relations only with the Republic of Korea, the southern half of the divided country. Japan established diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1965, but has never succeeded in establishing diplomatic relations with the North. In the beginning of the 1990's, there were some negotiations toward establishing diplomatic relations, but they did not end in any agreement. It is obvious that there are two major obstacles. One is the abduction issue. The other is the nuclear and missile issue. These two issues have become a major stumbling block in Japan-DPRK relations, and the abduction issue in particular is a very sticky point in the bilateral relations.

The Nuclear Issue

The issue of denuclearization of North Korea has been a matter of intensive debate in the Six-Party Talks. However, the road map for disabling nuclear facilities and the whole denuclearization process of North Korea is still not clear as of March 2008. In exchange for denuclearization and the disabling of nuclear facilities, North Korea expects sizable payoffs from five countries in the form of economic, energy, and humanitarian assistance. Initially, the nuclear issue was to be discussed and resolved within the framework of the Six-Party Talks, but it has become more of a negotiating matter mainly between the U.S. and the DPRK. It has also become quite obvious that North Korea

Table 1 Chronology of Recent Events in Japan–DPRK Relations

Sept. 2002	Koizumi visits Pyongyang. Japan–DPRK; Pyongyang Declaration issued.
Oct. 2002	Five abductees return to Japan.
May 2004	Koizumi visits Pyongyang for the second time.
Sept. 2005	North Korea promises to abandon all nuclear weapons.
June 2006	The North Korea Human Rights Act was enacted by the Japanese Diet.
July 2006	North Korea carries out missile tests.
Sept. 2006	Japan imposes financial sanctions. Start of the Abe cabinet.
Oct. 2006	North Korea carries out nuclear tests. Japan imposes additional sanctions, banning the entry of North Korean vessels.
Feb. 2007	North Korea promises to halt and seal the operation of nuclear facilities.
April 2007	Japan extends the existing sanctions.
July 2007	The LDP and Komeito lose a majority in the House of Councilors Election.
Sept. 2007	Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda takes over from Shinzo Abe.
Dec. 2007	Lee Myung-bak elected President of ROK.
Feb. 2008	Lee Myung-bak inaugurated as President of ROK.
Mar. 2008	Christopher Hill and Kim Ke Gwan meet in Geneva.

does not want to denuclearize itself unless the U.S. removes the DPRK from the black list of terrorist-supporting states.

The denuclearization of North Korea was agreed in the Six-Party Talks and was to be implemented in two major steps. In the first phase, North Korea shut down and sealed its key nuclear facilities in Yongbyon in July 2007 in exchange for the Banco Delata Asia settlement. In the second phase, the North Korean government was re-

quired to declare all of its nuclear programs and disable all of its existing nuclear facilities by the end of 2007 in exchange for economic, energy and humanitarian assistance. However, to date, North Korea has not yet declared all of its nuclear programs in spite of repeated negotiations, primarily between the U.S. and the DPRK.

The five countries dealing with the DPRK in the Six-Party Talks basically agree on the denuclearization of North Korea. Nevertheless, there seem to be subtle differences in national interests and attitudes among the five parties. To the United States, the denuclearization of North Korea and the disabling of nuclear facilities is a top priority. After the 9.11 incident, the United States has a serious concern over nuclear proliferation, especially nuclear weapons being handed over to terrorists or terrorist-supporting nations. Therefore, the United States strongly insists on the denuclearization of North Korea.

Turning to South Korea, the Roh Moo-hyun government wanted to maintain the "sunshine policy" and leave a significant contribution toward unification. It was more interested in a peace agreement and unification with the North than in denuclearization. On the other hand, the present Lee Myung-bak government wants to take a much more realistic and pragmatic approach. The new government seems to be much more interested in the denuclearization and human rights issues in North Korea than the former government was. The Lee Myung-bak's new initiative toward the North is: "Denuclearization, Liberalization, and \$3,000." (If the denuclearization and liberalization of the North is implemented, the South Korean government will commit itself to raise the level of North Korea's income per capita to \$3,000.)

Russia believes that the denuclearization of North Korea is an important matter, but keeping North Korea as a kind of buffer state against South Korea with the American military presence there is important for strategic reasons. China regards the denuclearization of

North Korea as very important, but it does not want to lose a communist neighbor as a buffer against democratic and capitalist states such as the U.S., Japan and South Korea. China wants to remain the greatest supporter of the DPRK, exerting influence on internal as well as external policy.

Finally, Japan under the Fukuda government, as under its previous two governments, is committed to resolving the abduction issue and the nuclear issue before normalizing diplomatic relations. Although some analysts point out that the nuclear issue is far more important for Japan as a whole, the abduction issue has become such a highly emotional one that it looks as if the settlement of the abduction issue has overtaken the nuclear issue in importance.

The Abduction Issue

The resolution of the abduction issue has now become almost a national obsession in Japan, especially in the mass media. Therefore, Japanese politicians in the governing coalition and the opposition parties alike consider it a top priority. To North Korea, the case is now closed after the five abductees and their family members were repatriated to Japan. North Korea insists that there are absolutely no more abductees inside North Korea.

The other countries express concern, but they seem to be less seriously interested in the issue. For other countries, the nuclear issue is much more important, and they want Japan to deal with the abduction issue on a bilateral basis. The Japanese government faces a deadlock and feels quite isolated, while the victims' families as well as the general public in Japan are extremely frustrated.

North Korean Abductions of Japanese Citizens

The abduction of Japanese citizens seems to have occurred during a

period of six years from 1977 to 1983. Only 17 (8 men and 9 women) have been officially recognized by the Japanese government.¹ There could have been as many as one hundred or more Japanese nationals abducted. The North Korean government long denied the allegations, but has officially admitted kidnapping 13 Japanese nationals. So far five abductees and their family members returned to Japan. According to North Korea, the eight other abductees are already dead, but their deaths under suspicious circumstances are disputed by the Japanese. The remains of two alleged dead abductees were returned to Japan, but DNA testing results were negative. Four other abductees' whereabouts are completely unaccounted for; and North Korea denies any involvement, even their entry into the DPRK. Dozens more are suspected to have been abducted, and these people are classified as special missing persons (*tokutei shissosha*).

Sharp disagreements exist between Japan and the DPRK concerning the abduction issue. North Korea insists that the abduction issue has been completely resolved and that no further negotiations are necessary. They argue that the abductions committed by North Korea were only a fraction of the crimes by Japan during its colonial rule; for example, forced labor and sexual slavery. To Japan, the abduction issue remains top priority. The Japanese government insists that it is far from being resolved, and it demands full explanations and the return of all victims as well as the handing over of the kidnappers. It also insists that unless the abduction issue is fully resolved, economic sanctions will not be lifted and no economic assistance will be given to the DPRK.

¹ "The Issue of Abductions of Japanese Citizens by North Korea: For the Return of All of the Abductees," Headquarters of the Abduction Issue Government of Japan, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-pacific/leaflet.pdf> アクセス：2008年3月15日

Other Abductions by North Korea

North Korea has perpetrated abductions also in South Korea. About 480 civilians are said to have been abducted to the North after the Korean War. Of these, 428 are said to be fishermen, 11 hijacked on KAL in 1969, 23 military and police personnel, and 18 others. Earlier, during the Korean War, 82,956 were taken as prisoners to North Korea; among these, 560 are estimated to be still alive.²

In addition to Japanese and South Koreans, there are many other nationals abducted by North Korean agents. According to one report, there are: 4 Lebanese, 1 Thai (wife of an American soldier), 1 Romanian (wife of an American soldier), 2 Chinese (from Macao), 4 Malaysians, 1 Singaporean, 3 French, 3 Italians, 2 Dutch, 1 Jordanian, etc.³

Reactions from other countries

There are various reactions from other countries regarding the abduction issue. China says that there is a limit to its influence on North Korea regarding this matter and that it is a bilateral matter to be discussed between Japan and the DPRK. The South Korean government under Roh Moo-hyun was not very keen on this issue because of the "sunshine policy." However, the Korean victims' families have become much more vocal and demanding toward their own government recently. They have even cooperated with the Japanese victims families in their rescue campaigns. The new South Korean government under Lee Myung-bak seems to be much more concerned with this issue, and the Japanese government seems to be more favorably inclined to

² Kazokukai, Sukuukai eds., *"Kita Chosen Rachi no Zenbo to Kaiketsu: Kokusaiteki Shiya de Kangaeru"*, Tokyo: Sankei Shimbun Shuppan, 2007, p. 84.

³ *Ibid.*

work together with the Lee government.

The U.S. shows concern and brought up the issue a number of times in its bilateral talks with North Korea. However, the U.S. wants to separate the abduction issue from the nuclear issue. It is obvious that the nuclear issue is regarded as a higher priority by the U.S. On the other hand, North Korea has been demanding that the U.S. remove the DPRK from the black list of terrorist-supporting states in exchange for denuclearization.

Normalization of Diplomatic Relations

Both Japan and North Korea agree in principle on future normalization but disagree on priorities and details. They sharply disagree on preconditions, the nature and amount of compensation, reparations, and economic cooperation, etc. Japan is prepared to make appropriate efforts toward the settlement of various past issues depending on the progress of the abduction issue. The Japanese government's position on the abduction issue has not changed, and it is determined to work toward gaining the safe and early return of all abductees. To the Japanese, North Korea has not been dealing with the abduction issue seriously.

For the DPRK, normalization of diplomatic relations is a top priority. In addition to economic cooperation, they say that Japan should compensate those who suffered during the past colonial rule. They insist that the abduction issue is already resolved and argue that the Six-Party Talk is a place for negotiations on the nuclear issue, not the abduction issue.

The Key Issues in Japan-DPRK Relations

In view of what has been happening in the Six-Party Talks and the bilateral negotiations between Japan and the DPRK, the key questions

to be raised here are the priorities among the three major issues and the preconditions for the normalization of diplomatic relations

1. Should the abduction issue be a precondition for negotiating diplomatic normalization? Is the Japanese government approach too hard-nosed and single-minded, putting too strong an emphasis on the abduction issue? Should it be more flexible?
2. Are the economic sanctions implemented by the Japanese government appropriate? Is the “dialogue and pressure” (*taiwa to at-suryoku*) approach appropriate? Prime Minister Fukuda appears to have inherited Koizumi's and Abe's approach without major modifications.

Different Approaches toward North Korea

North Korea is a tough negotiator, not only for Japan and the United States, but even for China. Analysts in Japan suggest different approaches as to how to deal with North Korea, a “troublesome” neighbor. Different approaches can be roughly classified into four different categories:

1. Nationalist (tough) approach
2. Soft approach
3. Idealist approach
4. Realist approach

1. The Nationalist (Tough) Approach

This approach takes the toughest stand toward North Korea. According to this approach, Japan is the only country threatened by North Korea's nuclear weapons, and Japan should be prepared. Japan needs to counter nuclear weapons with the same. They question how long Japan should pursue a policy of unrealistic pacifism. Some deny the reality of forced labor (*kyosei renko*) and sex slaves or “comfort

women” (jugun ianfu). They would also argue that there is no need for normalization with North Korea and that no reparations are necessary. They would further argue that Japan should be hard-nosed toward North Korea. They also warn that the U.S. may abandon Japan on the abduction issue.⁴

2. The Soft Approach

This may be the leftist approach on North Korea. According to this approach, diplomacy is a matter of give-and-take, and negotiation is fifty-fifty. They say, “Carefully listen to what North Korea says.” They argue that compensation (reparations) for the victims of the colonial past should come before normalization and that economic sanctions against North Korea are inappropriate. They recommend that Japan normalize relations with North Korea first and then negotiate the abduction issue.⁵

3. The Idealist Approach

The third approach may be classified as the “idealist or rational” approach. This may be the most comprehensive and broadest approach, taking account of the reunification of the divided states as well as the regional security of Northeast Asia. It argues that the following should be achieved step by step through cooperation and negotiation by the six countries:

⁴ For example, see Watanabe, Shoichi, “Itsumade Kuusoteki Heiwashugi de Iku-noka-Kaku niwa Kaku de Taikosuru Shikanai,” *Seiron*, September 2007, pp. 194–203; Sakurai, Yoshiko ed., *Watashiwa Kin Shonichi tono Tataakai o Yamenai*, Tokyo: Bungei Shunju, 2008, pp. 215–301.

⁵ For example, see Wada, Haruki, “Rachi Mondai to Kako no Seisan,” in Nitcho Kokko Sokushin Kokumin Kyokai ed., *Rachimondai to Kako no Seisan: Nitcho Kosho o Susumeru Tameni*, Tokyo: Sairyusha, 2006, pp. 9–18.

- A. Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula
- B. Normalization of U.S.-DPRK Relations and Japan-DPRK Relations; the abduction issue should not be an obstacle to Japan-DPRK normalization.
- C. Establishment of a Peace Mechanism in the Korean Peninsula—formally ending the Korean War
- D. Coexistence of North and South Korea and eventual unification
- E. The Establishment of a Security System in Northeast Asia (or East Asian Community)⁶

4. Realist Approach

The last approach may be called the “realist approach.” This approach was originally adopted by former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and inherited by Shinzo Abe with some modifications. This approach recommends a “comprehensive resolution” (*hokatsuteki kaiketsu*)—putting three major issues on the table at the same time and trying to solve them all together.

They emphasize the importance of using *taiwa to atsuriyoku* (dialogue and pressure) as negotiating tactics. This approach may sound good on the surface, but it is overly simplistic. It contains no detailed strategy on a concrete road map toward its goal. The current Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda basically inherited his two predecessors’ approach, but Fukuda is less assertive and confrontational and taking a “wait-and-see attitude.”

Recent Changes

There have been a number of recent changes that have affected

⁶ For example, Kang, Sang-jung, *Nitcho Kankei no Kokufuku: Naze kokko Seijoka ga Hitsuyo Nanoka*, Tokyo: Shueisha, 2003, pp. 171–190.

Japan-DPRK relations. The first is the visit to Pyongyang by the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill on June 21, 2007. This is a turning point for U.S. policy with North Korea. This opened direct government-to-government negotiations between the U.S. and the DPRK. Since Hill's visit, the U.S. and the DPRK have met on a number of occasions and exchanged views quite straightforwardly on the nuclear issue as well as other issues.

The second major change was former Prime Minister Abe's big defeat in the Upper House election on July 29, 2007. Abe, being paralyzed in domestic policy making processes, suddenly resigned. Yasuo Fukuda defeated Taro Aso in the LDP presidential election and took over from Abe in September 2007. Fukuda was welcomed by both the Chinese and South Korean governments as a "more moderate and less nationalistic" Japanese leader who would not visit Yasukuni Shrine. Both the Chinese and South Korean governments are more favorably inclined to cooperate with Japan.

Third, in December 2007, Lee Myung-bak won the presidential election in South Korea. He was welcomed in Japan as a less ideological and more pragmatic leader. Although his policy toward the DPRK is not yet clear, there seems to be a radical shift in the approach toward the North from the Roh Moo-hyun era. President Lee Myung-bak also quickly suggested a "shuttle diplomacy" between Japan and South Korea, which may lead to closer cooperation on issues related to North Korea between Japan and South Korea.

Fourth, Japan and the DPRK held a working-group meeting on September 5-6 in Ulan Bator, Mongolia. Again, no progress was made on the abduction issue at this meeting. The DPRK did not say the case was closed, but did not promise reinvestigations. As a result, economic sanctions were extended beyond October 13, 2007. It was interesting to note that the DPRK proposed a place for talks between the

Japanese government and the 1970 JAL (Yodogo) hijackers living in North Korea. One can speculate that they had the U.S. black list of terrorist states in mind. They seem to want to repatriate these hijackers to Japan as soon as possible in order to have North Korea removed from the black list.

Conclusion

The Fukuda government, engulfed by various domestic issues, is passively following the past policy vis-à-vis North Korea. However, that approach is not working, and there is a stalemate in Japan-DPRK relations. The Fukuda government is not taking a proactive approach of its own but instead seems to be taking a "wait-and-see" attitude toward the future development of U.S.-DPRK relations. There is one thing that the Japanese government does do: continue to demand that the U.S. government not remove the designation of North Korea as a terrorist state until the abduction issue and the denuclearization issue are satisfactorily resolved.

What the U.S. is striving for vis-à-vis North Korea are: the denuclearization of North Korea, a peace treaty ending the Korean War, and diplomatic normalization, but time is running out very rapidly for the Bush Administration. The key question now is: will the denuclearization of North Korea be achieved before the end of the Bush Administration? What happens in the next several weeks may be crucial in achieving the denuclearization of North Korea.

In view of the progress of the Six-Party Talks and the past bilateral negotiations with the DPRK, Japan needs to rethink and reformulate its own diplomatic strategy regarding North Korea. All the assumptions, priorities, and preconditions need to be thoroughly reexamined. A long-term, rational, and systematic strategy needs to be developed. The Japanese government needs to convince the general public re-

garding this new strategy, once it is formulated. The abduction issue is no doubt an important and emotional issue which concerns the great majority of Japanese people. There is almost a national consensus for its early resolution. However, the nuclear issue is by far the more important one that may affect Japan's national security and the well-being of the Japanese people as a whole.

As the current approach is not working well and facing a dead end, the Japanese government needs to reformulate its foreign policy vis-à-vis North Korea. It needs a more rational and flexible approach that may lead to the resolution of the nuclear issue and the abduction issue and to eventual normalization of diplomatic relations. The Japanese government needs to be tough on principles, but it should develop a more flexible approach in action. At the same time, the Japanese government needs much closer cooperation with the other five countries in the Six-Party Talks and needs to seek support from other nations on the abduction issue. In any event, the DPRK is a very tough country to negotiate with, and the Japanese government needs to develop a more rational and cool-headed approach.