

North Korea-Japan Relations in the Post-Cold War Era

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Introduction

In the spring of 1992 I published an Article in the South Korean government-backed journal Korea and World Affairs on the succession problem in North Korea in which I detailed misrule of the North Korean government and the harsh and oppressed conditions under which the citizens of that country live. Then a decade later on a live radio debate on Radio Nippon I was accused of being a "North Korean agent" by the Japanese parliamentarian Hirasawa Katsuei for having called for Japan to open direct, high-level negotiations with Pyongyang aimed at settling their outstanding differences and establishing diplomatic relations. One might wonder what had snapped in order to transform me from a South Korean flunky to a North Korean agent, but my reading of the situation has not changed at all. What has happened it that the international environment and the attitude of the United States have changed dramatically.

The demilitarized zone on the Korean peninsula was one of the front lines during the Cold War, and any transgression across it by either side was liable to set off World War III, thus there was no military solution for Korea, only a possible military nightmare. When the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union broke up, North Korea lost a vital source of cheap energy and raw materials, putting its economy into a tailspin. Meanwhile, Kim Il-sung, the only leader the republic had ever known, was aging and obviously on his way out, leaving behind his untested son. The point of my original article was to warn of a possible implosion and call for the international community to be ready to help Seoul pick up the pieces.

To the surprise of many observers including myself, Kim Jong-il seems to have inherited some of his father's remarkable talent for political survival, despite economic hardship and diplomatic isolation. At the same time, the United States has found its own actions unfettered by fears of an Armageddon-like exchange with Moscow, and has embarked on increasingly brazen military adventures in countries that it could never have attacked during the Cold War-Iraq, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and Iraq again. The idea in of an American attack on North Korea is still a nightmare for those living within what would become the war zone-including Seoul and potentially Tokyo-but seemed to be a daydream for some policy makers in the Bush administration. It was in this context that I urged Japan to embark on negotiations with Pyongyang that could reduce tensions and help eliminated pretexts for military action, and I was greatly encouraged a couple of months later when Prime Minister Koizumi proved to be of similar mind.

Given my history of cooperation with the anti-Kim Il-sung movement among North Korean residents in Japan, it is quite disheartening for me to look at the official organ of the North Korean Worker's party, the Rodong Shinmun newspaper, and have to admit the validity of many of the points they made in announcing that they were withdrawing indefinitely from the six-party talks and would maintain a nuclear deterrent. Whether or not Pyongyang's efforts at building a workable nuclear device have been successful is unknown, but its missile program has had some well observed successes, and the Japanese have ample cause for alarm at being used as a proxy for the United States should Pyongyang feel the need to unleash this "deterrent."

The Japanese started viewing North Korea as their most serious military threat as soon as the Soviet Union disintegrated. Recently, Japanese newspapers are full of articles about North Korea, and opinion polls are showing increasing hostility towards Pyongyang among the Japanese public.

Japan's efforts to engage North Korea in such a way as to reduce this threat have been hampered by a number of historical bi-lateral issues that are separate or only indirectly related to the larger framework of current world geopolitics. These include Japan's history as Korea's colonial master, the problems faced by the Korean minority in Japan and the Japanese minority in North Korea, the kidnapping of Japanese nationals by North Korean agents, and both country's nuclear, missile, and military potentials. In an attempt to achieve a breakthrough, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visited Pyongyang in September 2002 and again in May 2004. These trips led to progress on some issues yet failed to achieve the goal of normalizing diplomatic relations.

Still, the issues between the two countries are not intractable. Proper historical understanding of these issues would promote an atmosphere conducive to their solution and improved relations between Tokyo and Pyongyang, which in turn would go a long way towards settling issue of North Korea's nuclear program. In this paper, I would like to examine the North Korean-Japanese relationship in the context of the new international environment. To do this, I will look at the major themes of that relationship, attempts to improve relations, and the prospects for the future.

Historical Background

Conditions in North Korea

Japan, of course, was North Korea's colonial master for 36 years, and Kim Il-sung had been an anti-Japanese guerrilla leader. The fact that the Kim Il-sung cult of personality was based largely on exaggerated accounts of his role in defeating the Japanese

colonialists insure that internal propaganda as well as pronouncements from North Korea's foreign ministry emphasize the two country's historical animosity.

Juche (self-reliance), the state ideology of North Korea, promotes a highly autarchic economic policy of disengagement from the world market and massive investment of labor and capital in heavy industry. Much of the industry is geared towards the maintenance of an 800,000-man standing army. As a result, the export sector has remained undeveloped and there is a chronic shortage of hard currency. While the street scenes from Pyongyang we occasionally get a glimpse of in television reports don't look particularly dismal, it is important to remember that the standard of living is much higher in Pyongyang than in the countryside, and authorities are very careful about what they allow to be filmed.

The North Korean Worker's Party calls North Korea a "paradise on Earth," and claims that its people have nothing to envy in the world. However, the economy, which had been in trouble for years, was hurt badly by the collapse of their main trading partner, the Soviet Union. The loss of Soviet trade and aid led to problems in transportation, insufficient electricity, and a shortage of agricultural machinery and food.

The adverse conditions North Korea was faced with as a result of the end of the Cold War forced it to reconsider its relations with the countries with which it has the worst relations, namely the United States, South Korea, and Japan. Their proximity and the size of their markets make them North Korea's most likely trading partners. Any easing of tension would allow North Korea to divert some of its resources from the over-bloated military sector towards the household sector, a must if living conditions are to improve. Furthermore, without two superpowers aiming massive and hair-triggered nuclear arsenals at each other, Pyongyang has had to retool its policy towards a United States that would not have to risk nuclear annihilation should it decide to attack North Korea. Because North Korea does not have diplomatic relations with any of these three countries, merely setting up talks and maintaining a dialogue is extremely complicated.

North Korean Grievances

The North Korean grievances against Japan are for the most part relics of the colonial past. Major grievances include the failure of Japan to compensate North Korea for its colonial rule, discrimination against North Korean citizens in Japan who are descended from ethnic Koreans in large part coerced to work in Japan during the colonial era, and wartime atrocities such as the practice of forcing Korean women into sexual slavery for the benefit of Japanese troops.

Compensation for Colonial Past

In 1965, Japan signed a treaty with the government in Seoul recognizing it as the only lawful government in Korea. This left Pyongyang out in the cold as far as reparations were concerned. During the Cold War, North Korea insisted that Japan break off relations with Seoul and rejected the idea of "cross recognition" (i.e. the recognition of both Seoul and Pyongyang by the major states in the region), which it thought would help perpetuate the division of the peninsula. Furthermore, sanctions that Japan imposed on North Korea in response to its bombing of the South Korean cabinet delegation in Rangoon in 1983 and after the Korean Airlines downing incident in 1987 further strained relations.

The end of the Cold War changed Kim Il-sung's mind about pursuing relations with Japan, and in particular the June 4, 1990 meeting between Soviet President Gorbachev and his South Korean counterpart, Roh Taewoo. Their meeting led to the formal establishment of diplomatic relations on September 13 of that year, making it the first country to have relations with both Seoul and Pyongyang. With the precedent of cross-recognition already established, there was less reason to demand that Japan scrap its 1965 treaty with Seoul as a condition for setting up relations.

Treatment of Koreans by Japan

One of the most complicated aspects of the North Korean-Japanese relationship is the North Korean minority in Japan. Starting in 1910 when Japan annexed Korea, Koreans migrated to Japan in search of work. Often they had been pushed off their land by new Japanese landlords, and often were pressed into working in Japan to pay off debts. Conscription of Korean labors became particularly prevalent as Japan expanded militarily on to the Asian continent. During the later war years in particular, Koreans formed the bulk of the work force in many factories and mines in Japan. By some estimates between 10% and 20% of the victims of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombs were Koreans. By the end of the war, there were approximately 2.3 million Koreans in Japan.

Under colonial rule, Koreans were made Japanese citizens. While they never enjoyed equal rights and were always the subject of discrimination, Koreans living in Japan were nevertheless allowed to vote in Japanese elections. However, as soon as the war ended, Koreans lost their Japanese citizenship. Most Koreans returned to their homeland during the first five post-war years, but the outbreak of the Korean War halted this, leaving almost a million Koreans in Japan clustered mainly in the major metropolitan areas. With the signing of the San Francisco Peace Treaty, Japan regained its independence and Koreans in Japan were forced to register as aliens. Still today, these Koreans and their descendants are forced to register their fingerprints with the government and carry identity cards with them at all times.

A further complicating factor occurred in 1965 with the signing of the South Korea-Japan Basic Treaty. All those Koreans in Japan who did not apply for South Korean citizenship became North Korean citizens by default. This was part of the reason that the original ratio of North Koreans to South Koreans in Japan was about 2:1, in spite of the fact that the vast majority of Koreans who came to Japan were from the far south of the country. Over the ensuing years, more and more North Koreans have switched to South Korean citizenship, and the ratio has reversed.

In spite of discrimination, many Koreans have become quite affluent. Largely excluded from many companies, the bulk of Koreans are self-employed or work in family businesses. Most pachinko parlors (pachinko is a pinball form of gambling) are owned by Koreans, and the industry generates a huge amount of revenue. This money is also one of the most important sources of hard currency for Kim Il-sung's government.

Due to its chronic lack of hard currency, North Korea has come more and more to depend on the North Korean community residing in Japan. The pro-Pyongyang North Korean Residents Association of Japan (Chochongryon) regularly sends gifts to Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. The gifts are not necessarily entirely voluntary. Over 90,000 Koreans emigrated from Japan to North Korea in the 1960s and 1970s, and these people have come to be treated almost as hostages. They can be coerced to write to their relatives still in Japan to ask for money to be sent.

There are worries that the money sent home by North Koreans in Japan will find its way into the suspected nuclear program. The United States has urged Japan to cut off this flow of funds as part of international sanctions against North Korea. Japan was slow to act, but the financial failure of the credit cooperative system run by the North Korean Residents Association, which had deposits of 3 trillion yen (30 billion dollars) if , allowed Japanese financial authorities to step in and appoint Japanese managers for the system as part of a bail-out scheme. Any damage that Japan could levy on North Korea via economic sanctions would largely come from cutting off this money.

Another issue raised by the North Koreans is the problem of "comfort women," or coerced prostitutes used by the Japanese military during World War II. Korean women formed the majority, but there were also women from Japan, other Asian countries, and Holland and Russia. Because of the nature of their sufferings, these women were extremely reluctant to come public and make their charges against the Japanese government. However, in the past several years, there has been a flood of elderly women who have made such charges. A number of lawsuits have been filed against the Japanese government both in its own courts and overseas. Until recently, Japan was not forthcoming in addressing this issue, denying that the government or the military had any part in abducting or managing these girls. It maintained that because the entire

operation was run by private businessmen, the government had no responsibility. From the North Korean point of view, the problem must be settled on the basis of physical compensation and thorough investigation.

Japanese Grievances

In contrast to North Korean grievances, Japanese grievances are much more recent in origin and pressing in nature. They have their roots in the post-World War II era, and the economic, diplomatic, and military isolation that North Korea have found itself in since the end of the Cold War has aggravated some of these problems.

Treatment of Japanese in North Korea

During the quarter century between 1959 and 1984, roughly 6000 Japanese women married to Koreans followed their husbands back to North Korea. These women were promised that they would be allowed to visit their families in Japan, but hardly any of them ever has. According to North Korea, thanks to the care of Kim Il-sung, every one of these women was happy and none of them ever wished to visit their old homes. The Japanese often raised this issue, but the North Koreans countered by saying that when these women came to North Korea, they were extended North Korean citizenship, so their welfare is a purely domestic matter.

More recently, Japanese abducted by North Korean agents have been in the headlines in Japan. During the 1970s and 1980s, a number of Japanese citizens disappeared from beaches in Japan or while on foreign trips and were later suspected to have been taken to North Korea. Secretly abducted Japanese were useful to North Korea in training their spies, who could travel more freely and operate more effectively overseas by masquerading as Japanese nationals. After a South Korean airliner was blown up in November 1987, two North Korean agents were arrested in Abu Dhabi.

One committed suicide, but the other, Kim Hyonhui, eventually testified about the planning and carrying out of the bombing. She said that she had been trained to masquerade as a Japanese woman, and in the course of her training was made to live with a woman from Japan who was working for the North Korean intelligence apparatus. Japanese police brought pictures to Seoul during the interrogation of Kim Hyonhui, and she confirmed that a picture of a woman who had disappeared from a Japanese beach years earlier indeed was of her teacher. Eventually, Japanese police came to claim that more than a dozen Japanese nationals that had disappeared were taken against their will to North Korea. Prime Minister Koizumi's two trips to Pyongyang focused largely on gaining information on the fate of these abductees and securing the return of those still alive as well as their family members.

North Korean Military Programs

The most serious issues for Japan are North Korea's nuclear weapons program and its manufacture and testing of ballistic missiles. North Korea has already sent missiles over Japanese territory on their way to the Pacific Ocean. Should such a missile be armed with a nuclear device, the implications for Japan are quite frightening indeed.

During the early 1990s, United States, no longer under the constraints of the Cold War, started considering the possibility of attacking North Korean nuclear facilities. In order to resolve the tension, the United States and North Korea in 1994 entered into what is known as the "Agreed Framework." The crux of the agreement was that North Korea would halt its nuclear weapons program and shut down its graphite reactors and plutonium reprocessing facilities in exchange for two 1000-megawatt light-water plants that would be provided by the United States, Japan, and South Korea.

North Korea was obligated to stay in the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty and allow the International Atomic Energy Commission to inspect its nuclear facilities. During late 2002 and early 2003 announcements by Pyongyang that it would restart its nuclear program and withdraw from the Non-proliferation Treaty made headlines and prompted politicians in the U.S. and Japan to call North Korea a menace and a greater danger to the world than Iraq. However, in all fairness it should be noted that the two light-water reactors were originally due to have been completed by 2003 but were already at least five years behind schedule. Bellicose statements from Washington, including calling North Korea part of an "Axis of Evil" and release of an updated nuclear doctrine listing North Korea as a possible target for a U.S. nuclear attack also predated the North Korean moves.

Koizumi-Kim Talks

Koizumi's most radical foreign policy initiative was his opening to North Korea. It came as a total shock to most observers in September 2002 when he suddenly announced that he would visit the isolated Stalinist state later that month. Koizumi's sudden opening to North Korea was probably due in part to North Korean leader Kim Jong-il's distress at being included in George W. Bush's "Axis of Evil," especially as he saw the U.S. gear up for an invasion of fellow axis "member" Iraq. It is also likely that Koizumi wanted to remove North Korea from Bush's shortlist of targets in his "war on terrorism," as any military conflict in Korea could have dire consequences for Japan.

What was just as surprising as Koizumi's sudden decision to make a day trip to Pyongyang was Kim Jong-il's admission that North Korean agents had after all kidnapped almost all of the missing Japanese that Tokyo had accused them of having abducted. In a press conference immediately following his first visit to Pyongyang,

Koizumi said that Kim Jong-il had honestly acknowledged that people affiliated with North Korea had carried out the abductions of Japanese nationals and offered his apologies. However, the majority of the abductees were reported to have died in accidents or natural causes, a claim that the Japanese public rightly viewed with suspicion. In spite of the outrage over the dead abductees, Koizumi's trip was widely viewed as a success and boosted his popularity, which had been sagging, just as his party was gearing up for a number of by-elections.

The abducted people and their relatives who are listed as still living have been allowed to return to Japan, with Koizumi personally fetching five family members (and ultimately U.S. Army deserter Charles Jenkins, who married one of the Japanese abductees during his 39-year stay in North Korea) during his second trip to Pyongyang in May 2004. This was an important issue for Japan, and as the North Korea system is structured around a personality cult devoted to the infallible leadership of Kim Jong-il and his father Kim Il-sung, the apology should not be taken lightly. However, to the extent the trip was covered, Kim's gestures were taken lightly in the American press. In the May 24 issue of Time Asia, Jim Frederick described Kim Jong-il as having confessed "unrepentantly" to the abductions. This account is at odds both with Koizumi's statements to the press and also with the Joint Declaration issued by the two leaders at the conclusion of their September 2002 meeting, which indirectly but unmistakably indicates North Korean responsibility for the abductions by calling on that country to take proper measures to prevent the recurrence of regrettable problems effecting the life and security of Japanese nationals.

With the abductees back in Japan, Japanese demands now focus more on Pyongyang's missile program and its admission to be continuing a nuclear weapons program in apparent violation of a treaty it made with Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington during the 1990s. North Korea, for its part, is still seeking reparation for Japanese colonial rule and wartime abuses as well as better treatment for the North Korean minority in Japan. Although these issues have been viewed as obstacles for decades by both Tokyo and Pyongyang, Kim Jong-il's new forthcoming posture and the urgency felt by both sides due to the "war on terrorism" seemed to provide a better chance for problem resolution than at any time in the past half century.

Conclusion

Japanese Parliamentarian Hirasawa Katsuei had every right to be outraged by the abduction of Japanese citizens. He, and all Japanese, has reason to worry about a nuclear Pyongyang, especially given their successful missile program. However, Pyongyang's grievances cannot be rejected out of hand simply because one disapproves of its Stalinist political system. One can say that Japan's coercion and

abduction of Koreans into labor and prostitution before and during World War II is ancient history, but it is no more ancient than Japan's own complaints about Russia having seized some Japanese islands at the end of that same war. Furthermore, as Pyongyang points out, the number of North Koreans tragically effected by Japan's colonial rule far outnumber the number of Japanese similarly effected by the abductions. I make this statement not to justify Pyongyang's actions, but rather to point out the validity of the grievances of both sides. At least some of Pyongyang's grievances were addressed in the Koizumi-Kim talks and were reflected in the joint communiqué with the result being a willingness on Kim's part to make concessions.

However, Japan is not in a position to extract similar concessions regarding North Korea's military programs, as Japan is not the source of the security threat as perceived in Pyongyang. Only the United States can do that. While it can be said that the United States is willing to participate in six-nation talks and it is Pyongyang that has pulled out, it can also be said that it is the United States that insists on dragging along four chaperones for every rendezvous with North Korea. Why is this? What makes this format so sacred? The United States worked within the framework of the "quartet" (U.S., E.U., Russia, and the United Nations) during Middle East peace talks, but this in no way precluded separate, one-on-one talks with Israel and with the Palestinians. It would seem to me if any gesture, any token concession was to be made, one could hardly find a less painful one than two-party talks. After all, Koizumi's experience shows that Kim Jong-il will make concessions in such a format.

If the United States were to say that might makes right and reserve for itself the right to decide who can have what kind of weapons and what kind of governments, it would surely provoke an outcry across the world, but at least it would be intellectually honest. The American president, as sheriff, judge, and executioner, could tell Pyongyang or Tehran or Damascus to change their ways or else, and the "international community" would either have to put up or shut up.

In substance, this is indeed what is happening. Nevertheless, George Bush, Condoleezza Rice, and others in the administration couch their statements in platitudes about "meeting international obligations," "violating U.N. resolutions," "breaking treaties," and other references to international law. It gives me no particular pleasure to point out this obvious hypocrisy, given Washington's total disregard of the basic principles of sovereignty and self-determination, its scraping of the ABM Treaty, its blind-eye towards countless violations of U.N. resolutions by its ally/proxy Israel, its refusal to join the World Court, its sponsorship and participation in overthrowing governments around the world, and on and on. Of course, there is also the hypocrisy of making the existence of a nuclear weapons program casus belli when the United States not only maintains a ridiculously massive nuclear force but also has used it against

Japan and, according to current military doctrine, is prepared to use it again for non-existential reasons. One could argue even that there is hypocrisy in accusing Kim Jong-il of repressing his people when the United States has a history of not only supporting, but also creating repressive regimes from Chile to Iran, although this argument would be lost on many people. Still, empathy for the suffering of the North Korean people should not lead us to immerse them in warfare, destroying them in order to save them. The soft-landing scenario at the core of Seoul's "Sunshine Policy" that would gradually integrate the North economically in advance of an eventual reunification is a much better prescription for what ails them.

While Pyongyang's actions regarding its nuclear weapons program ultimately hinge on what happens in Washington and not Tokyo, Koizumi did the world a service by his visits to Pyongyang, even if the only immediate benefits were the repatriation of a few abducted Japanese citizens. Koizumi showed the world that Kim Jong-il is capable of making meaningful concessions in rational negotiations, and is not the "madman" he is portrayed to be in the popular media or by many pundits and government officials. Of course, it is certainly a concern to any country whether a neighbor might be developing nuclear weapons, but it seems to this writer that the North Korean nuclear issue has been mishandled by the United States. The declaration that North Korea is part of an "Axis of Evil" and the war against Iraq and very open and unabashed attempts to kill Saddam Hussein have convinced Kim Jong-il that he is in a struggle for his very survival. Iraq was totally defenseless after a dozen years of bombing, sanctions, and inspections, and none of its concessions to the United States were enough to stave off an invasion. Unless Washington halts its saber-rattling and provides guarantees that North Korea's peace and sovereignty will be respected, a nuclear deterrent is Kim's safest option.

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Titus North received his PhD in International Political Economy from the University of Pittsburgh and has taught part-time for the Department of Political Science.

Suggested Reading

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