



Will Japan and North Korea be able to solve the abduction issue? by Sebastian Maslow

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Throughout 2014 North Korea has conducted a series of short-range ballistic missile tests, the latest of which occurred July 13. Despite the North's military activities, the administration of Abe Shinzō has reiterated its commitment to dialogue with the DPRK. Abe's cautious posture in response to Pyongyang's Scud (Hwasong-6) missile tests indicates a new level of confidence in resolving the abduction issue, an issue that has stalled progress in normalizing bilateral relations and has limited Tokyo's role in forging a multilateral solution to the DPRK nuclear crisis. As such, North Korea's pledge to reopen investigations into the abduction cases announced at a bilateral meeting held in Stockholm from May 26-28, 2014, marks a clear deviation from previous patterns of diplomatic stalemate.

North Korea's September 2002 official acknowledgment of (and apology for) its state-sponsored campaign of kidnapping Japanese nationals during the 1970s and 1980s was designed as a stepping-stone to normalization. The Pyongyang Declaration provided a roadmap for Japan-DPRK rapprochement and a rare statement by the late Kim Jong-il to solve the security crisis on the Korean peninsula. Japan's 2002 overtures to the DPRK regime serve as a reminder that Tokyo pursues its own diplomatic agenda over North Korean affairs and as such can play a significant role in Northeast Asian security politics. However, in addition to external pressure from the US, the abduction issue has unleashed an avalanche of domestic protest which has catapulted the kidnappings to the top of Tokyo's DPRK agenda. Trumpeted by a powerful domestic lobby, the abduction issue remained on top of the agenda throughout the last decade. The human drama converging over the abductions, particularly the case of Yokota Megumi (abducted at the age of 13 in 1977), has shaped public perceptions such that the kidnappings have been considered Japan's key security concern vis-à-vis North Korea. According to a Cabinet Office survey in 2013, this trend continues, with 87.4 percent of the respondents singling out the abductions as the main concern in Japan-DPRK relations (nuclear weapons came in second with 59.1 percent and missiles third with 49.6 percent).

The Abe government has worked hard to solve the issue since its return to power in December 2012. As Abe's political ascendancy is closely linked with the kidnapping cases, the

abduction lobby has provided him with a platform to advance his views on national security and constitutional revision. Proponents of a 'strong Japan' have emphasized the vulnerability and thus illegitimacy of Japan's 'postwar regime,' which proved unable to ensure the safety of its citizens against foreign intrusions. North Korea was utilized in the process of 'taking Japan back' from the constraints of this pacifist constitutional order, while Pyongyang served early on as the *prima facie* case for Japanese defense planners to argue for the procurement of cutting-edge technology including ballistic missile defenses that have added to Tokyo's incremental departure from its post-1945 pacifist security identity.

The current series of talks is the result of careful diplomacy between Japan and North Korea initiated early in 2013, marked by the dispatch of Abe adviser Iijima Isao to Pyongyang in May 2013. This came shortly after mending of the crisis over the North's mobile missile deployment. Iijima met North Korean officials again in Dalian during October 2013. This laid the basis for secret talks between Japan and North Korea held in Hanoi and Hong Kong in January and February 2014. Japan's current DPRK initiative should be described as 'humanitarian diplomacy,' as initially the focus was not only on the abduction issue but also on the return of the remains of Japanese who died before and after 1945 in the territory of present-day North Korea. Another round of informal talks were held on the side-lines of the Red Cross humanitarian conference held in Shenyang early in March 2014, preparing the foundations for the resumption of official talks in Beijing on March 30-31. The diplomatic momentum resulted in the landmark Stockholm talks of May 26-28. The agreement reached at the Stockholm meeting resulted in the reopening of the investigations of the abduction cases in exchange for Japan's lifting of unilateral sanctions toward the North following a bilateral meeting in Beijing on July 1.

This development resembles earlier efforts. In August 2012 the government of Noda Yoshihiko initiated talks over investigating the remains of the Japanese buried in the North. In addition, the Kim Jong Un regime has deviated from the North's previous stance that treated the abduction issue as 'solved,' agreeing to include the case in the talks. In addition, in 2008 an agreement over the reinvestigation of the Japanese abductees was reached under the government of Fukuda Yasuo. In 2007, the first Abe government agreed to compromise on the question of reconciliation in return for progress on the kidnappings – a step appreciated by the North. Yet, all these developments crumpled due to political instability and the frequent change of government in Japan, which has made it increasingly difficult to build mutual confidence.

With the return of stability (and thus predictability) in Japanese politics, the Abe government is positive about

achieving progress toward resolving the abduction issue. The North has established a 'special investigation committee' promising to reinvestigate the remains of 'all Japanese.' The committee consists of about 30 members and is chaired by So Tae Ha who is believed to be a close associate of Kim Jong Un. As the commission is associated with the North's the National Defense Commission, it is equipped with a comprehensive mandate. The body started its work on July 4. The formula of 'all Japanese' covers abductees (of which 860 cases are discussed within Japan), Japanese spouses who returned with Korean partners to the North (1,400 cases), other Japanese believed to live in the North (1,800), and remains of the Japanese buried in the DPRK (approx. 20,000).

In return for the investigations, Japan on July 4 lifted three sanctions that allow for the re-entry of Chongryon officials to Japan, the relaxing of financial restraints, and port visits by North Korean vessels to Japan. These measures are of limited economic impact and thus do not undermine the UN-led multilateral sanctions regime. In addition, the lifted sanctions do not include the resumption of the ferry service between Wonsan and Niigata by the North's *Manyongbong-92* ferry.

Crucial in explaining the timing and robustness behind the current momentum is the declining influence of the abduction lobby in Japanese domestic politics. A crucial step was the incorporation of the parents of Yokota Megumi into the current dialogue. While Megumi has served as the movement's 'poster child,' the Yokotas were allowed to meet their granddaughter Kim Eun-gyong in Ulan Bator in early March 2014. The meeting was not coordinated with the abduction lobby. This indicates that Abe is not only aware of the destructive impact this movement had on Japan's DPRK agenda but that a sense of pragmatism has returned to Tokyo's North Korea policy, now steered by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in close coordination with the PM's office. In addition, the current talks are well timed in relation to Abe's Cabinet decision on collective self-defense (CSD). Japan's move toward lifting its DPRK sanctions has replaced the CSD debate on the front pages of the Japanese media. In contrast, North Korean motives are surely a mix of calculations: hoping to secure alternative financial resources and humanitarian aid while breaking out of its international isolation, which has increased due to China's improved ties with South Korea. In addition, Pyongyang has been very active in trying to persuade Tokyo to stop the sale of the Chongryon headquarters which served as its quasi-embassy in Japan.

The trajectory of the talks will depend on the North's reinvestigation report, early results of which are expected at the end of this summer. The investigation process grants Japanese officials access to the North, and this may as serve a basis for establishment of a liaison office in the DPRK. In addition, if the 2002 process is a guide to Japan-DPRK diplomacy, a foreign minister level meeting may follow on the sidelines of the Myanmar ARF summit in early August.

Since 2002, the abduction issue has constituted a separate diplomatic agenda for Tokyo. Clearly, it is up to North Korea to provide credible evidence rather than the bogus 2002 material. It is the task of the Abe government to accept the results (even if negative) and to convince the public to move forward in Japan-DPRK relations. Meanwhile, Japan's current

initiative should not be perceived as an attempt to deviate from international efforts toward solving the Korean crisis. Instead, international society should welcome this move, as Tokyo moves toward solving the key obstacle in relations with North Korea. This process will enhance Japan's international role in seeking a solution to the DPRK nuclear program in cooperation with Washington, Seoul, Beijing, and Moscow. Finally, as the North Korean regime must know that a fourth nuclear test will result in the breaking down of the talks, Japan's initiative has already helped to stabilize the region.

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