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Japan-North Korea Relations: The Forgotten Agenda BY TESSA MORRIS-SUZUKI

Tessa Morris-Suzuki, professor at the Australian National University, explains that “As a new U.S. administration takes the reins in Washington, and with a significant national election looming in Japan, there is both an opportunity and a need to reassess Japan’s interactions with North Korea and to broaden the agenda of discussion.”

Since former Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro made his historic visit to Pyongyang in September 2002, Japan’s relationship with North Korea (DPRK) has been dominated by a single issue: the plight of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korean agents in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Though five surviving abductees and their immediate families are now back in Japan, negotiations between Japan and North Korea have reached an impasse: Japan’s position is that twelve abductees (and possibly more) are alive and being held against their will in North Korea, while North Korea insists that all the abductees have been accounted for and that the matter is closed.

The abduction issue has frozen broader bilateral relations and resulted in the neglect of other crucial issues in the Japan-North Korea relationship. The current Japanese government approach has failed to produce a breakthrough on the abduction issue, and has severed channels of bilateral communication which might help in obtaining further information about the fate of the abductees. It has also restricted the role that Japan plays in the Six Party negotiations on the North Korean nuclear issue. As a new U.S. administration takes the reins in Washington, and with a significant national election looming in Japan, there is both an opportunity and a need to reassess Japan’s interactions with North Korea and to broaden the agenda of discussion.

The Pyongyang Declaration, jointly signed by Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi and North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il in 2002 is a good starting point. The Declaration, amongst other items, committed both countries to addressing the problems of Korean residents in Japan. But, amidst recriminations about the abductions, this promise, along with other political and economic clauses of the Declaration, has remained a dead letter.

Zainichi Koreans (Koreans who have lived in Japan since the colonial period and their descendents) play a pivotal role in the Japan-North Korea relationship. They were key participants in the trade and investment activities which made Japan one of North Korea’s leading trading partners during the 1970s and early 1980s. However, their place in this relationship is also beset by social and human rights problems. A positive proposal from Japan to address problems faced by Korean residents in Japan (and to create a greater public understanding of these problems) could help to revive the stalled bilateral negotiations. It might also provide a basis for re-opening discussions with North Korea about other long-neglected issues, particularly the problems of families divided between Japan and North Korea.

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After the end of the colonial era, some 600,000 Koreans remained in Japan. Though over 95% originated from the southern half of Korea, a substantial number of *Zainichi* Koreans were critical of the South Korean (ROK) regime and either identified themselves more closely with North Korea, or defined themselves as nationals of a yet-to-be-created reunited Korea. When Japan and South Korea signed a treaty normalizing relations in 1965, Korean residents in Japan who opted for South Korean nationality were given improved legal status in Japan. Since that time, the rights and social status of all Koreans in Japan have gradually improved. However, those who have not chosen to take up South Korean nationality still face disadvantages, including difficulties in obtaining internationally-recognized travel documents. Since Japanese public opinion and media generally identify these people as “North Koreans in Japan,” they are also subject to considerable hostility and popular prejudice, sentiments that have intensified since the abduction issue hit the headlines.

The uncertain status of Koreans in Japan was a factor behind a mass migration of *Zainichi* Koreans to North Korea which occurred, with strong Japanese government support, from 1959 onwards. The 93,340 people who migrated from Japan to North Korea between 1959 and 1984 included 6,731 Japanese citizens (mostly spouses of ethnic Koreans or children of mixed marriages). Most of the migrants to North Korea had lived in Japan for decades, and left behind close relatives. These Japanese and former *Zainichi* Koreans have faced widespread discrimination and sometimes political persecution from the North Korean authorities. During the latter part of the 1990s, the plight of over 1,000 ageing Japanese wives living in the DPRK became the central issue in negotiations between Japan and North Korea. However, since 2002, as the Japanese government and media shifted their focus to the abductions, the plight of these women has been virtually forgotten.

One legacy of the mass migration is the fact that former *Zainichi* Koreans are now escaping from North Korea across the border into China and seeking to go back to Japan by various routes. Some 200 refugees from North Korea (all of them either ethnic Japanese, *Zainichi* Koreans who participated in the mass migration, or the immediate relatives of these migrants) have recently re-settled in Japan, and there is every reason to believe that the number of these refugees will increase substantially in the near future, as economic collapse and food shortages lead growing numbers to make the dangerous journey out of North Korea. However, the Japanese government has no clear policy on the issue, and offers no assistance to the refugees as they struggle to readjust to life in Japan. Meanwhile, Japanese sanctions on North Korea include a ban on the only passenger ferry linking Japan and the DPRK, intensifying the separation of families divided between the two countries.

The abduction issue, then, is just one of a number of intersecting social and human rights problems in the Japan-North Korea relationship. Broadening the focus to include the questions of Korean residents in Japan and former migrants from Japan now living in the DPRK could open a new channel for dialogue between the two countries. This could assist in creating new routes for approaching the abduction issue itself, while also providing a framework in which the Japanese government might address both long-standing problems of *Zainichi* Koreans and the newly-emerging problem of North Korean refugees in Japan.