

Japan: U.S. Partner or Focused on Abductees?

Differences between the South Korean views, along with the Chinese, and those of the United States became evident soon after the second North Korean nuclear crisis erupted in the fall of 2002. Although divergences between Japan's priorities and policies and those of the United States have been less obvious, they also exist. Japan usually tends to follow the U.S. lead, but it has carefully avoided binding itself to Washington's position on the North Korean nuclear issue. Despite a U.S. attempt to isolate North Korea, Japanese prime minister Junichiro Koizumi has traveled to Pyongyang twice since 2002, at one point suggesting that normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and North Korea could occur during his tenure. Furthermore, although Japan is deeply concerned about North Korea's nuclear program, the issue of the roughly two dozen Japanese citizens abducted by North Korean agents in the 1970s for espionage training is now threatening to overtake Japanese foreign policy toward North Korea to the exclusion of all else.

Since 2002, Japan's overall attitudes and policies toward North Korea have moved from initial enthusiasm for rapprochement to frustration and the contemplation of more coercive measures. With the six-party talks at an impasse for almost a year, Japan has been slowly moving toward a harder line on North Korea, even considering imposing economic sanctions, but it has pursued a policy independent of the United States. Although the United States has put all other negotiations with North Korea on hold until the nuclear issue is resolved, Japan has been more willing to consider other issues in parallel, from possible normalization of ties to

David C. Kang is an associate professor in the government department and adjunct associate professor at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College. The author would like to thank Ellen Frost for her helpful comments on earlier drafts of this piece.

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resolution of the abductee issue. It could possibly move closer to the South Korean and Chinese positions, advocating gradual measures and cautious engagement. Yet, Japan could also live with the current unresolved situation indefinitely. Japanese policymakers are very worried about the prospect of a nuclear North Korea, but nothing is compelling Japan to make a clear policy choice. No country in the region, including Japan, believes that an unprovoked North Korean military strike is a realistic possibility. Risking a war on its borders is not a desirable option, nor is risking regime collapse in North Korea.

The complex North Korea situation has exposed an emerging alignment in Asia, one that may pit China and South Korea against the United States. If North Korea conducts a nuclear test and the United States presses for sanctions, this rift will deepen and become public. Normally, the United States could count on Japan's support. Domestic as well as foreign policy pressures, however, may very well hinder Japan from siding fully with the United States. In particular, if Japan and North Korea come to a satisfactory resolution of the abductee issue, much of the public sentiment in Japan favoring more coercive measures toward the North will dissipate.

An Increasingly Hard Line

In September 2002, just weeks before the October revelations that the United States had accused North Korea of having a second nuclear program, Koizumi traveled to Pyongyang for a breakthrough meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, the first-ever meeting between the two countries' heads of state.¹ The summit produced a dramatic declaration: after three decades of denials, North Korea admitted and apologized for the past abduction of Japanese nationals and held out the possibility of normalizing diplomatic ties between the two countries. Kim, referring to the kidnappings, vowed that "mistakes will not be repeated," an astonishing rebuke of the policies of his father and predecessor, Kim Il-sung. Kim Jong-il said that the time had come to "liquidate the past."² An end to "abnormal relations," he stated, "will also dissipate the security concerns of the Japanese people."³ The summit's concluding Pyongyang Declaration was significant, as both sides apologized for past actions—a precondition for moving forward—and pledged to cooperate in the future.⁴

Unfortunately, this optimism was quickly overshadowed by the nuclear crisis. Within just weeks of Koizumi's trip, all hopes of a rapid improvement in relations faded as North Korea and the United States squared off.⁵ Furthermore, Japanese public interest in and frustration over the fate of the abductees was far greater than most observers had expected. The Japanese

public became obsessed with the progress of Japan–North Korea negotiations on this issue. With the nuclear weapons crisis complicating matters, the two sides have made little progress since 2002 on the abductee issue, including the disposition of deceased abductees’ remains. When Koizumi returned to Pyongyang in May 2004, he negotiated the release of five children of the Japanese abductees, opened an investigation into 10 others, and stated publicly that he hoped for the normalization of relations between Japan and North Korea “within the year.”⁶ Yet, normalization was sidetracked again when DNA testing in November showed that two sets of Japanese abductees’ remains provided by North Korea were in fact the remains of different people. The DNA issue became even more complicated when the prestigious journal *Nature* published a report that cast doubts about the reliability of the tests and revealed signs of a Japanese cover-up.⁷

Japan could live with the current unresolved situation indefinitely.

Japanese foreign policy toward North Korea has continued to remain focused almost exclusively on the abductee issue, with Japan freezing food aid to North Korea in 2005 in protest over the matter while seeking to make it an issue of equal importance to the nuclear dilemma in the six-party talks, when they were restarted. North Korea returned the favor, saying that resumption of the six-party talks depends not only on the U.S. position, but also on Japan’s stance on the abduction issue.⁸ Relations with Tokyo had deteriorated precipitously after Pyongyang’s baffling attempt to return the wrong remains and its subsequent unwillingness to fully resolve the issue. Koizumi has since backpedaled on the issue of normalization, saying in early 2005 that Japan would not normalize relations unless North Korea faithfully adhered to the Pyongyang Declaration and that he would not set a deadline for the restoration of diplomatic ties.⁹

The official Japanese government position is that it will not seek sanctions without a broad consensus among the countries involved in the dispute. On June 25, 2005, Koizumi said that Japan was not in a situation where it could just impose sanctions and settle the issue because it would have to respect the views of the other countries in the six-party talks and cooperate with its regional neighbors. Nevertheless, although Koizumi has been resisting public pressure to implement economic sanctions against North Korea, shifting domestic sentiment has increasingly pushed him into taking a harder line.¹⁰ On the eve of Koizumi’s second trip to Pyongyang in early 2004, Japanese public sentiment was evenly divided: a *Mainichi Shimbun* poll found that 42 percent of respondents favored the imposition of sanctions

and 42 percent opposed.¹¹ By October 2004, however, opinion polls showed 63 percent of Japanese citizens and 83 percent of Japanese Diet members favored imposing sanctions.¹²

As this pressure increased, Japan took its first step toward sanctions on March 1, 2005, by implementing the amended Law on Liability for Oil Pollution Damage, banning foreign vessels without proper insurance from Japanese ports. The law effectively slapped a minor sanction on North Korean shipping, mandating that foreign ships weighing more than 100 tons take out liability insurance as protection against oil spillages caused by running aground or other accidents.¹³ Of the foreign vessels that entered Japanese ports in 2003, most met insurance requirements, but only 2.5 percent of the 982 North Korean vessels that visited Japanese ports in 2004 had such coverage.¹⁴

Because 2004 trade between Japan and North Korea had already reached a 25-year low, it is not yet clear whether the sanctions will amount to anything more than a symbolic gesture. Bilateral trade has decreased for a number of reasons, including stricter inspections on North Korean shipping that began in 2002, focused especially on goods that could contribute to North Korea's nuclear program. Also rendering Japan's sanctions less effective, North Korea has been rapidly expanding its trade with China and South Korea. Furthermore, many North Korean ships are below the 100-ton weight threshold for requiring insurance, allowing them to avoid the new rule. Although North Korea did not specifically react to the shipping insurance bill, in December 2004 its Foreign Ministry said any move to impose sanctions would be tantamount to a "declaration of war."¹⁵

Japan has also begun to use money laundering laws to interdict remittances being sent home from North Koreans in Japan. Although the flow of funds has not stopped, remittances have declined from an estimated \$100 million per year in the mid-1990s to about \$30 million in 2003.¹⁶ In October 2004, Japan also hosted a multinational joint military drill for the Proliferation Security Initiative in the open sea of Tokyo Bay. Neither China nor South Korea took part in the exercise, but Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force, together with forces from the United States, Australia, and France, boarded and searched an imaginary ship carrying weapons of mass destruction.¹⁷ Thus, by mid-2005, Japan had in the course of just three years moved from considering normalization and dramatic improvements in ties with North Korea to a much harder line.

Japan's Regional Context

While Japan has been focused on the abductee issue, the rest of the region has made little progress on the nuclear issue. The six-party talks have met

four times between their inception in August 2003 and the last meeting in July 2005. Policy coordination among the members has been difficult for essentially two reasons. First, the countries involved have different priorities regarding the peninsula and disparate opinions about how best to deal with North Korea; shifting regional dynamics and the emergence of competing interests and priorities has slowed progress. Second, the range of policy options available to countries is severely limited because of North Korea's deterrent capabilities, and few practical policies are available.

The biggest policy priority gap is between the United States, which prefers to isolate North Korea and pursue a more coercive strategy that could include measures such as sanctions, quarantine, and taking the matter to the UN Security Council, and China and South Korea, both of which favor patient economic engagement and regional integration as the best way to convince North Korea to modify its ways and open up to the outside world.¹⁸ The Bush administration is focused

on North Korean strength—its nuclear program and the possibility that North Korea will sell weapons of mass destruction to terrorist groups—but East Asian countries are more worried about North Korean weakness and subsequently seek to encourage North Korea's nascent economic reforms, to avoid the potentially disastrous economic and political effects of a North Korean collapse.¹⁹

Such a collapse threatens to unleash more refugees than the entire global refugee population of 2004.²⁰ Even assuming a best-case scenario in which collapse did not turn violent, the regional economic and political effects would be severe. Economic growth in China, South Korea, Japan, and Russia would be most severely affected, if only because of the disruption from refugees and the increased demand on resources placed on regional governments. Because of this fear, as long as North Korea continues to refrain from testing a nuclear weapon and from breaking a voluntary moratorium on testing intercontinental missiles that it began in 1999, neither China, South Korea, nor Russia is likely to support U.S. policies designed to increase pressure on North Korea. In this situation, Japan's movement toward the U.S. position of more coercion puts it at odds with the rest of the region.

Shifting dynamics in the region further complicate Japan's decisions. Japan currently has unresolved territorial claims with North Korea and with South Korea, as well as Russia and China. These disputes burst onto the international stage in the winter of 2005 when Japanese disputes with China

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and the Koreans threatened to derail major diplomatic initiatives over issues such as the nuclear crisis, regional trade, and Japan's attempt to gain a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.²¹

The Japan-China relationship, displaying both competitive and cooperative dimensions, is particularly dicey.²² China's rapid growth, especially in the last decade, contrasts sharply with Japan's economic stagnation and has been accompanied by increased Chinese political influence in the region.

If the abductee issue is resolved, Tokyo is less likely to pressure North Korea.

China and Japan have also had a series of disputes in the past few years, for example, over history, Japan's junior high school textbooks, and territorial claims. On a number of issues from North Korea to regional economic cooperation, China, not Japan, has emerged as the regional leader. Japan has not even sought regional leadership since 1945. In fact, although Japan may still build up its military beyond present levels and

take a more assertive role in the region, apparently it shows little evidence of attempting to balance Chinese influence.²³ Japan publicly mentioned Taiwan for one of the first times in its joint statement with the United States on February 19, 2005, but that statement merely called for the parties to resolve the Taiwan issue in a "peaceful manner" and also said that Japan looks forward to working cooperatively with China. CSIS/Pacific Forum president Ralph Cossa notes that this mention "hardly constitutes a demonstration of Japan's willingness to confront the rapidly growing might of China."²⁴

Conversely, evidence that Japan will not challenge China is mounting. A *Mainichi Shimbun* poll in May 2004 found that 70 percent of Japanese oppose making changes to Article 9, the "peace" article, of the Japanese constitution.²⁵ Were Japan to renounce Article 9, most of East Asia would most likely be worried about resurgent Japanese aggression. Additionally, although Japan and China still have unsettled historical animosities and territorial disputes, economic integration between the two has increased over time and continues to grow rapidly. In 2002, China overtook the United States as the largest exporter to Japan.²⁶ China is now Japan's second-largest trading partner in terms of total trade, while Japan ranks as China's largest trading partner. Some may interpret Japan's efforts to build regional free-trade agreements as an attempt to assert regional leadership, but political scientist Saadia Pekkanen argues that Japan's efforts are simply "designed to ensure its economic security—long the most consistent and dominant of goals for the Japanese government, and the least likely to ever go away."²⁷ Absent the Taiwan issue, little in Japan's economic priorities, institutions,

history, or culture or the structure of the international system leads to the conclusion that Japan and China will erupt into serious conflict.

Japan's Limited Options

Japan today finds itself caught between its initial openness to and regional support for economic engagement, as well as its increasing frustration with North Korea, and its willingness to consider coercive measures toward the North. Japan may ultimately face an unpalatable choice: ally firmly with the United States at the risk of complicating ties with its neighbors or move farther away from the United States and improve its regional relations. Evidence indicates that Japan would not risk severely harming its political and economic relations in the region, particularly with China. In June 2004, for example, Japan joined China, Russia, and South Korea in declaring their willingness to provide North Korea with fuel oil, which the United States had cut off in late 2002.²⁸ At the G-8 summit meeting that same month, Koizumi also urged President George W. Bush to engage with North Korea.²⁹ Although the United States hoped that the six-party talks would involve five countries speaking with one voice to North Korea, the dynamics quickly devolved into a confrontation between the United States and North Korea, with the other four countries attempting to find some middle ground between the two.

Even if Japan ultimately chooses to join the United States in pursuing more coercive measures, few realistic policy options are available. War, even a surgical strike, would be extremely risky and would be unlikely to destroy all of the North's nuclear facilities, which are presumed to be scattered about the country in bunkers and caves.³⁰ Furthermore, although a solid U.S.–South Korean deterrent has restrained North Korea for more than 50 years,³¹ deterrence on the peninsula works both ways. With its No-dong missiles, North Korea could potentially devastate Tokyo, some 1,200 kilometers from suspected sites.³² As current National Security Council director for East Asia Victor Cha notes, “No-dong ballistic missile deployments effectively hold Japan hostage. The warning time for a North Korean artillery shell landing in Seoul is measured in seconds (57), and for a ballistic missile fired on the Japanese archipelago, measured in minutes (10). There is no conceivable defense against these threats that does not result in hundreds of thousands of casualties.”³³

Coercive measures short of military action are also unlikely to succeed. As noted earlier, economic sanctions would have limited utility because the North is not sufficiently integrated into the international economy. Indeed, without the cooperation of China and South Korea, sanctions by Japan and

the United States could be circumvented and would be ineffective. Furthermore, North Korea historically has tended to respond to pressure with more pressure, not concessions. If Japan supports U.S.-led efforts, it may have symbolic value but little practical impact.

Despite these limited options, many constituencies in Japan appear to be using the abductee issue as the rationale for a harder line toward North Korea

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and for a more assertive Japanese foreign policy in general.³⁴ Among this strategy's supporters are the Japanese Defense Agency, conservative newspapers such as the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, and other elements in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, all of whom firmly support a close U.S.-Japanese military and diplomatic relationship. Yet, some countervailing domestic pressures do exist. The economic bureaucracies and the industrial groups, including economic associations

such as Keidanren, see complementary needs and capabilities within the region and are less eager to hew too closely to the United States.³⁵ If North Korea can resolve the abductee issue to Japan's satisfaction, Japanese public sentiment against North Korea is likely to dissipate, removing much of the Japanese public's support for pressuring the North. Accordingly, even if the six-party talks do start up again, the United States may find itself isolated in its calls to increase pressure on the North, with even Japan declining to support harder measures.

Trapped in a Regional Realignment?

The situation in North Korea is one of a number of factors that is creating a new alignment in East Asia, with China and South Korea moving closer toward each other on one side and the United States on the other. Although the U.S.-Japanese alliance is stronger than ever, Japan is also likely to resist being forced to choose between the United States and its regional neighbors. Within this framework, Tokyo's policies toward North Korea have sought to avoid binding Japan to the U.S. position while domestic politics have forced Tokyo to center its policy heavily on the abductee issue. If the abductee issue is resolved, Tokyo is less likely to pressure North Korea. Even if Japan were to side with Washington and impose economic sanctions, however, such a policy would be ineffective without the cooperation of China and South Korea, who are focused on avoiding North Korean collapse and the economic and humanitarian disaster that would result. These factors

lead to the conclusion that Japan can live with the current unresolved situation indefinitely.

Given the varying priorities in the region and the limited options available, the future of the nuclear issue will likely resemble the past: a continued exchange of vitriolic rhetoric between the United States and North Korea; more moderate rhetoric from China, South Korea, Japan, and Russia; and stalemate over the nuclear issue itself, with no side taking any tangible actions. Japan's priorities and policies regarding North Korea are a result of complex domestic and international factors. Although some observers may perceive that Japan supports sanctions, Washington risks misunderstanding the source and depth of that support, which rests in the abductee issue, not the U.S.-Japanese alliance. If Washington policymakers fail to recognize these factors, the United States risks creating trouble with its most steadfast Asian ally and isolating itself in the region.

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