



Japan-North Korea Ties Likely to Mend Last

by Hisahiko Okazaki

Since June's summit meeting between North and South Korea, diplomatic activities surrounding Pyongyang have heated up. In addition to improved relations with Seoul, Pyongyang has moved rapidly forward in improving ties in much of Asia with Europe, and even with the U.S.

Japan-North Korea relations are expected to lag behind those of other countries, however. One reason is the national sentiment of the Japanese people. Diplomatic overtures toward North Korea started after a missile agreement was reached between the U.S. and North Korea last year. Japan felt strong antipathy toward North Korea following the launch of a Taepodong missile in August 1998, as it occurred at a time when national sentiment already had grown hostile toward Pyongyang following a police report in 1997 on alleged abductions of Japanese nationals by North Korean agents. Therefore, while the U.S. could resume normalization talks with Pyongyang because an agreement had been reached on the suspension of Taepodong missile launches in 1999, public opinion did not allow the Japanese government to do the same.

Although the alleged abductions occurred decades ago, the memory remains fresh in Japanese minds because they were only publically revealed in 1997. In particular, the suspected abduction of Megumi Yokota – a schoolgirl – could not be explained by any political motive. This kidnapping must continue to torment her and has profoundly pained her parents. Given this national sentiment, it is unlikely that the abduction issue will be dropped from the agenda of any future Japan-North Korea talks.

From the opposite viewpoint, if North Korea were to admit to the abductions, repatriate the abductees, and punish those responsible for the kidnappings, there might well be a mood change in Japan that would support normalization, in spite of concerns regarding regional security in the Far East and fears of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. In that sense, North Korea holds a trump card.

There is another strategic and diplomatic obstacle in the way of the normalization of relations between Tokyo and Pyongyang – one that does not hamper other nations: the issue of compensation.

According to unofficial estimates, the 500 million dollars that Japan gave South Korea when diplomatic ties were normalized is now worth 10 billion dollars. And compensation to North Korea would be nearly 1 trillion yen (approximately nine billion dollars) even after taking into consideration the difference in the populations of the two countries.

Observing the current situation in the Far East, the possibility of a war on the Korean Peninsula has become very remote, but has not been totally eliminated. Should a war occur, the life of hundreds of thousands of South Koreans – our friendly neighbors – and tens of thousands of U.S. troops – our allies – would be sacrificed. In addition, North Korea is currently viewed by the U.S. as very likely responsible for developing and exporting weapons of mass destruction. Given this, should Japan offer a huge sum of money to North Korea? Is it not similar to providing economic aid to the Soviet Union when Hokkaido was under threat of invasion during the Cold War?

After consideration, it should be apparent that a prerequisite for Japan giving funds to North Korea is the certainty that war would be an impossibility on the Korean Peninsula. Is it not advisable, as a policy proposal, for Japan to make it a condition that progress be made in confidence-building measures – as was seen in Europe during and toward the end of the Cold War – before diplomatic ties be normalized?

Transparency Is Vital

Europe has a long history of such confidence-building steps, although not all were implemented. Measures proposed in Europe varied widely, such as those to increase transparency by setting up hot lines, giving prior notification of military exercises, mutual exchanges of observers to military exercises, and disarmament measures effected by separating conflicting forces and mutually reducing the level of forces.

As a matter that directly affects Japan, it is desirable that transparency be secured over not only Taepodong missiles, but also the deployment and test-firing of Rodong missiles, which can reach more than half of the Japanese archipelago. These prerequisites should not be called conditions. Rather they are considerations to be given as a matter of course. It is Japan's due obligation to expect that kind of security not only for itself, but also for our friends and allied nations.

Of course, this policy first needs to be thoroughly coordinated with the U.S. and South Korea. Currently, neither the U.S. nor South Korea is urging Japan to be circumspect about those points. They support our efforts to improve relations with Pyongyang in general. But no one knows how long this attitude will last. Both the administrations of U.S. President Bill Clinton and ROK President Kim belong to a softer group in the policy spectrums of each nation.

There are also those in the U.S. and South Korea who oppose these policies. In addition, though the U.S. and South Korea have voiced their support for Japan's stance, it is

highly probable that they will criticize Japan if it adopts policies toward Pyongyang that are softer than their own.

After all, nobody is opposed to the view that the goal of international politics in the Far East is the easing of tensions between the two Koreas and an increased confidence between them, which will be simultaneously accompanied by Japanese economic assistance to North Korea. If that view is taken, it is highly likely that the normalization of diplomatic ties between Japan and North Korea will come after those of the U.S. and South Korea.

In the event of a military emergency on the Korean Peninsula, the obligations and risks that Seoul and Washington would bear concerning the lives of South Koreans and U.S. soldiers are immeasurably larger than those Japan would have. Therefore, it is prudent for Japan to respect the intentions of friendly nations – which have a larger stake in the game – and follow their paths, while trying not to stand in the way of their policies. If Japan goes too far, for domestic reasons, as it did in the early 1990s, criticism will be unavoidable sooner or later.

No other country in the world needs to pay more careful consideration to normalizing ties with North Korea than Japan does. Thus is probably why Japan will lag behind the rest of the world in doing so. And that choice is right. The biggest prize North Korea can gain from normalizing diplomatic ties with the world is economic aid from Japan. Negotiations over the issue naturally should be the grand finale of diplomatic activities involving North Korea.

Thus, it follows that Japan will be the last nation to develop diplomatic ties with North Korea. We should not be misguided by the irresponsible opinion that holds that Japan will be the only country that has missed the bus.

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Responses to PacNet 44

Comments are always welcome to PacNet. Professor Wu Xinbo's essay, "Managing U.S.-China Relations" brought some early comments:

Professor Wu's paper envisions a situation in East Asia that is not in place now and very well may never be. His scenario would likely be a recipe for United States withdrawal from Asia – militarily and economically. It is not at all clear that China's response to such a vacuum would not frighten others in Asia. Finally, Taiwan is an indeed Sino-U.S. matter for discussion. But mostly it is an issue of the people involved on both sides of the straits. U.S. commitment is to peaceful resolution and no support to political change without the consent of Taiwan's people.

James A. Kelly, Pacific Forum CSIS.

Contrary to the argument in *PacNet 44*, the Taiwan issue is indeed a geopolitical one for the United States. In the interests of its own security and those of its allies, the U.S. cannot concede that China has the right to use force in order to bring Taiwan to heel. If the U.S. were to accept Chinese use of force, what impact would that have on regional security? Would the U.S. be signaling that it has no intention of remaining in the Asia Pacific region long-term? Furthermore, what would be the consequences if Japan were to lose confidence in U.S. strategic protection?

A Chinese attack on Taiwan might indeed cause chaos on Taiwan. A failed attack could also bring down the increasingly insecure regime in Beijing.

If China is so worried about alleged Japanese militarism, why is it doing its best to provoke it - for example by sending their spy ships through the Tsugaru Strait, the heart of the Japanese archipelago, and its continued violations of Japanese territorial waters? The hubris of the "plan" towards Japan is likely to bring about the result that China least wants. Zhu Rongji's recent visit to Japan seemed to show that at least some in the Chinese leadership had learned from the disaster of Jiang Zemin's visit in 1998. But the "plan" seems to march to its own tune. Who rules in Beijing?

Robyn Lim, Nanzan University, Nagoya