



February 23, 2004

Japan's Policy Toward North Korea – How Effective are 'Sticks'? by Yuki Tatsumi

The second round of the six party talks over the North Korean nuclear crisis will finally take place in Beijing Feb. 25. As Japan enters the upcoming talks, the Koizumi government faces a difficult challenge: it must both be uncompromising in its basic principles and maintain enough flexibility to negotiate with Pyongyang.

Ever since the Koizumi-Kim summit in August 2002, when North Korea admitted responsibility for the abduction of Japanese nationals, Japan has been taking a markedly tougher stance toward Pyongyang. With strong public support, Tokyo has taken several steps to impose pressure on the North if necessary. Followed by the recent passage of a revised foreign exchange law, political leaders have begun deliberation on legislation that will effectively forbid vessels that are either from North Korea or have stopped at North Korean ports from docking in Japan. With already anemic trade between Japan and North Korea, these measures will further squeeze North Korea's economy if put into effect.

Japan's rising frustration with North Korea is not hard to appreciate. Pyongyang continues to pose a direct security threat to Japan with its ballistic missile capability. Incursions by North Korean spy ships have increased the level of anxiety within the Japanese public. North Korea's refusal to renounce its nuclear program has heightened tensions in the Northeast Asian security environment. On top of these security concerns, negotiations over the abduction issue have stalled since the return of five abductees to Japan. Voices in Japan calling for a tougher stance vis-à-vis Pyongyang come not only from the public but also from political leaders across party lines. The recent legislative developments in Japan very much reflect the nation's mounting frustration and resentment toward North Korea.

In principle, Tokyo is wise to strengthen its diplomatic hand by creating domestic legal frameworks for imposing unilateral sanctions against North Korea. For too long, Japan had only "carrots" (economic assistance, food aid, etc.) as leverage against Pyongyang. With these recent measures in place, Tokyo is now equipped with "sticks" as well. If used wisely, the combination of carrots and sticks can greatly enhance Japan's bargaining position with North Korea.

At the same time, however, Japan must recognize the potential implications that unilateral sanctions may have on the six-party process. Some time ago, North Korea declared that it would regard economic sanctions as equivalent to a declaration of war. Although perhaps a bluff, Pyongyang could at a minimum cite economic sanctions as an excuse to

stall further talks – a scenario that would not be in Japan's long-term interests.

Furthermore, the imposition of sanctions will be counterproductive without a clear benchmark against which North Korea's behavior can be measured. Unless Japan's resolve is firm enough to accept the possibility of an open conflict on the Korean Peninsula, it is imperative that Japan maintain a certain degree of flexibility so that it can jump-start bilateral dialogue with Pyongyang when necessary. Economic sanctions against North Korea – without clear guidelines for Tokyo to decide whether to tighten, ease, or lift them – may only harden North Korea's current position.

If Japan were to impose economic sanctions against North Korea today, such a decision would meet very little domestic opposition. The Japanese public is angry at the regime in Pyongyang for its involvement in the abduction of Japanese citizens, many of whom are said to have died under suspicious circumstances. A true test for the Japanese government is not whether it can pressure North Korea to meet Japanese demands, but also whether it can have enough self-restraint to encourage potential changes in the regime's behavior. What if the Japanese public remains hostile toward North Korea even after it comes clean with the abduction issue? What if Pyongyang reaches an agreement with the United States to dismantle its nuclear program? Can the Japanese government, facing enormous domestic pressure, stay on the course toward normalization of diplomatic relations with North Korea? Does Japan have a strategy if sanctions do not yield the desired policy results?

The Japanese government must carefully weigh each of its options and make a level-headed decision on how to move forward. After all, economic sanctions are tools for achieving a diplomatic end, not a means of expressing the country's frustration toward another nation.

Yuki Tatsumi is adjunct fellow of the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC. She can be reached at yukitatsumi@hotmail.com