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Editor's note: These two PacNets provide contrasting views of Japan's position and role at the Six-Party Talks.

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Japan's hard line backfires by Weston S. Konishi

Japanese hardliners have sabotaged their nation's negotiating position in the Six-Party Talks over the North Korea crisis. Japan has been relegated to the role of fifth-party whiner – protesting North Korea's abduction of Japanese nationals but offering no public proposal to make a deal with Pyongyang that would bring closure to the issue. Tokyo must adopt a better strategy that will allow it to bargain hard – but at least bargain – with North Korea to achieve its objectives.

The abduction issue tops Japan's agenda at the talks. Pyongyang has admitted kidnapping at least 13 Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s, but has repatriated only five and claimed that the others are no longer alive. In November 2004, North Korea handed over the alleged remains of Yokota Megumi, who was abducted when she was 13 and reportedly committed suicide while in captivity. DNA tests performed in Japan suggested that the cremated remains were not hers, but questions have risen about the accuracy of the initial tests.

The steady drip of revelations has overshadowed Japanese perceptions of North Korea and hardened public opinion against the regime. A more rational assessment of Japan's priorities would focus on resolving the security threat posed by North Korea's illicit nuclear program and long-range missiles. The Japanese public is in no mood to concentrate on those details, nor are they inclined to strike a deal that provides economic largesse to Pyongyang for scraps of dubious information about the fate of the abductees.

It is easy to criticize Japan's preoccupation with the abduction issue. But in Japan the abductions are seen as a national tragedy. As a result, Japanese negotiators kept raising the abduction issue during the fourth round of Six-Party Talks in early August. North Korean officials lashed back, and even Chinese and South Korean diplomats seemed to complain that Japan was "holding up" discussions on the nuclear crisis.

Japan's preoccupation with the abduction issue would not be so misplaced if it could approach the problem from a stronger position. Instead of merely venting anger, Tokyo should find ways to use the six-party process to bring some closure to the abduction cases. Not only would this approach stand a better chance of attaining Japan's main objectives, but it could also reinforce proposals of other nations at the negotiating table.

South Korea's offer to provide 2 million kilowatts of electricity to the North in exchange for denuclearization seems uniquely suited to a greater Japanese role. Tokyo could agree to join this scheme on the condition that Pyongyang meets a clear set of expectations on resolving the abduction issue.

There are doubts whether Seoul can deliver this deal on its own. The Nautilus Institute argues that Japan is the only nation with the resources to rehabilitate North Korea's power system so it can absorb a large infusion of electricity from the South. There are also questions whether Seoul can unilaterally finance the project, which may cost $2.4 billion to start and as much as $1.5 billion per year to continue.

A joint energy scheme would be difficult to coordinate, but Tokyo and Seoul have cooperated on a similar project under the auspices of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO). Japan might be criticized by the U.S. for its more flexible approach, but it is hard to imagine the U.S. objecting to an aid package that would be paid for by other nations and that would be delivered only if the North completely dismantled its nuclear programs.

The real problem is that Japanese officials cannot consider a deal with North Korea given the political environment in Tokyo. Groups like the National Association for the Rescue of Japanese Kidnapped by North Korea have created a powerful political force that has effectively killed off any initiative to engage Pyongyang. Far from empowering Japan's position at the Six-Party Talks, these hardliners have only marginalized Japan. Without much to contribute beyond protests, Japanese negotiators are now almost entirely reliant on the other powers to reach an agreement on denuclearizing North Korea, let alone reaching some settlement of the abduction issue.

Japan needs to claim an active role in the six-party process or it risks being out of step with its partners as it was prior to the 1994 Agreed Framework. Although all minds in Tokyo have been focused on the elections, the coming shakeup in the Diet could provide political cover to reorient Japan's policy toward North Korea. Prime Minister Koizumi should instruct his new Cabinet to develop a proposal that would commit North Korea to an institutionalized, long-term fact-finding process ensuring that both parties continue to work on the abduction issue beyond the end of Koizumi's term.

Japanese negotiators could then enter the six-party sessions with a proposal in hand and work out the details in subsequent working group sessions. Whether it is at this six-party meeting or soon thereafter, Tokyo should make the bottom line clear: that there will be no aid to North Korea without progress on the abduction issue, and that without Japanese aid no large-scale economic deal will be sustainable.

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PacNet 39C

Japanese goals at the Six-Party Talks: a reassessment

by Kazuyo Kato and Phillip Y. Lipscy

In the just-resumed fourth round of Six-Party Talks, Japan has decided to seek a "comprehensive solution to issues of nuclear arms, missiles, and abductions." Since the first round in August 2003, Japanese officials have reiterated their position that Japanese economic aid to the North is contingent on normalization of relations, which in turn depends on a resolution of all three outstanding issues. This approach has invited a harsh rhetorical assault from North Korea and criticism from China, Russia, and South Korea, which see the missile and abduction issues as distractions. Even the United States, while supportive of Japan's diplomatic position, has emphasized the primacy of the nuclear problem at the talks. What is behind Japan's diplomatic approach at the talks and how might Japanese goals be achieved?

Japanese goals at the Six-Party Talks

Domestic opinion has become a major motivator of Japanese foreign policy vis-à-vis North Korea since the late 1990s. Electoral reforms in 1994 created single-member districts and large proportional representation blocs, necessitating a shift in emphasis from particular issues to broad-based public appeal. Since revelations about abductee Yokota Megumi emerged in 1997, Japanese abductees and their families have taken on a special status in Japan comparable to the 9/11 victims in the U.S. The public grew further cognizant of the North Korean threat after the long-range *Taepodong 1* missile flew over Japan in 1998.

Public hostility toward North Korea is strong and entrenched – a December 2004 Asahi poll indicates 63 percent support for economic sanctions with only 25 percent opposed, and a clear majority opposes the provision of economic aid. This gives Japanese officials a strong incentive to adopt a harsh line vis-à-vis North Korea. The contrast with South Korea is informative. In an April 2005 poll conducted by member companies of Gallup International, 36 percent of South Koreans cited North Korea as a military threat, while 22 percent cited Japan and 20 percent the U.S.

Japan's position also reflects genuine differences in national security interests. North Korean missiles do not yet pose a direct threat to U.S. metropolitan centers, although some estimates put Alaska within range. For South Korea, more geographically proximate threats overshadow the dangers of long-range missiles. South Korea also fears the destabilizing consequences of a North Korean collapse and hence prefers a softer approach. China and Russia do not see North Korea as a direct threat. It is therefore logical that Japan places comparatively greater emphasis on the missile issue. In addition, some Japanese officials and LDP leaders, most notably Abe Shinzo, see the abduction issue as one of national security – North Korea violated the basic human rights of a sovereign nation's citizens and has not guaranteed the security of the abducted persons. Other states primarily view the abductions as a human rights concern. Notably, South Korea has downplayed its own sizable abduction problem to prioritize rapprochement with the North.

Some Japanese government officials view North Korean behavior – abducting foreign nationals and shooting missiles over another's territory – as indicative of a state bent on flaunting international norms. North Korea cannot be trusted to honor international agreements unless it signals a willingness to respect such norms by resolving the missile and abduction issues.

Japan's position also reflects a rational bargaining strategy. By refusing to decouple the abduction and missile issues, Japan can preempt international pressure to provide economic aid in return for North Korean concessions on the nuclear issue alone.

Policy recommendations

By insisting on a comprehensive resolution of the abduction, missile, and nuclear issues, Japanese leaders have adopted an assertive national security strategy that also appeases their domestic audience. However, as a *de facto* matter, the abduction and missile issues remain sidelined at the talks, and negotiating parties have focused on resolving the nuclear problem. With conditional support from the U.S. and South Korea and outright hostility from China and Russia, Japanese prospects for a satisfactory resolution of the abduction and missile issues within the six-party framework appear grim. We suggest the following policy recommendations:

First, Japan should continue efforts to establish an effective missile defense system. While technological constraints remain, a credible defense system can diminish the value of North Korean missiles as a bargaining item. A defensive missile shield is consistent with the spirit of Japan's pacifist constitution and will allow Japan to take greater responsibility for its national security. Japan should be prepared to introduce its missile defense system as planned by 2007.

Second, the Japanese government should do more to facilitate dialogue between Japanese and Korean victims of abductions and take other steps to garner greater public awareness of the issue in South Korea. Public pressure transformed Japanese policy on the abductions after 1997, and a similar awakening could bring South Korea closer to Japan's position at the bargaining table. Japan and South Korea represent enormous potential sources of economic aid. A united front will put far greater pressure on North Korea.

Third, in framing the abductions as a human rights issue to garner international support, Japan could do more to enhance its credibility by addressing blemishes in its own human rights record. Japan's lax policy toward human trafficking and sex exploitation resulted in Tokyo being placed on the watch list in the U.S. State Department's 2004 *Trafficking in Persons Report*. While recent progress has been encouraging, such problems threaten to undermine Japan's moral high ground and deserve attention.

Finally, controversies over Yasukuni Shrine and whitewashed history textbooks make it more difficult for Asian neighbors to openly cooperate with their Japanese counterparts. This is particularly counterproductive for diplomatic cooperation between South Korea and Japan, two

countries that share significant security interests and democratic values. While such common interests are less obvious with China and Russia, lingering hostility is a clear handicap for Japanese diplomacy. Koizumi's decision to forego a Yasukuni visit on Aug. 15 to focus the Sept. 11 elections on postal reform has prevented a further deterioration in Japan's position. However, Japanese leaders must seriously consider more long-term solutions such as the construction of a less controversial national war memorial.

Japanese leaders will continue to face strong public pressure on their policies toward North Korea for the foreseeable future. At present, bilateral negotiations remain the only realistic, if disheartening, option. In the long-run, policy initiatives to garner international support, particularly from Japan's neighbors, represent the most promising means toward achieving Japanese diplomatic objectives.

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