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Abduction Diplomacy and the Six-Party Talks
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It has been a busy month in Tokyo. High-level representatives from several nations trying to negotiate a nuclear weapon-free Korean Peninsula gathered on the sidelines of an academic meeting to see if the Six-Party Talks can be restarted after a long hiatus. While all eyes were focused on whether U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Chris Hill would meet with his North Korean counterpart (he didn't), there was a dramatic development in the tragic saga of Japanese and South Korean citizens abducted by North Korean agents for spy training in the 1970s and 1980s, one that presents both opportunities and challenges.

The Japanese government announced the results of DNA tests indicating that the husband of a well-known Japanese abductee was likely a South Korean thought to have been abducted in 1978. In a cruel twist of fate, the Japanese victim is said to have committed suicide in North Korea years ago, her husband is supposedly still there with their daughter, and the agent who might have abducted the husband now lives in Seoul and runs his own business. Japanese investigators immediately petitioned South Korean authorities for a chance to interview the former agent.

These developments potentially draw together via an emotional issue two countries that have responded quite differently to North Korea's atrocious human rights record. But, Japan-South Korea cooperation on abductions is a diplomatic minefield, scarred by forced migration and other legacies of Japan's colonization of Korea before and during World War II. Though U.S. policymakers might be tempted to use this development to help drive a regional dialogue on human rights, it would be better to direct this and other issues tangential to the nuclear negotiations away from a six-party context and into broader international forums. Here's why.

In Japan, the 15 or so victims' families banded together in the late 1990s to press Tokyo for action. With little evidence and a government focused on other priorities in dealing with North Korea, it was a lonely fight at the beginning, except for a few (predominately) rightwing allies in the legislature and among certain nonprofits and media outlets. When North Korea's leader Kim Jong-il finally admitted the acts to Japan's Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro in 2002, there was an outpouring of support all around the nation, though the families stuck loyally close to the political right.

The families regularly co-organize events with their rightwing allies, many of whom are at the forefront of efforts to revise history textbook passages regarding Japan's aggression in the 1930s and 1940s or other causes that fan nationalist sentiment in Korea and China. So when the U.S. ambassador to Tokyo visited the beach where a young Japanese girl was abducted 29 years ago (as he did last month) and vowed to talk to President Bush about the tragedy, it looks to many in Beijing and Seoul that Washington is taking sides in the bitter fight for the historical moral high ground in Northeast Asia. Why? Because standing next to him are not only the victims' families, but also their nationalist supporters.

Contrast this with the environment for South Korean activists who toil on behalf of at least 500 victims from their country. The ROK government, not wanting to upset its engagement policy with the North, abstained at a December 2005 UN vote on the first formal rebuke of North Korea's human rights record mentioning abduction victims. A month later, the South Korean ambassador-at-large for human rights, no less, criticized those (countries) who use "the human rights issue…as a political means to attack a certain individual, group or a country." He added, "Peace on the Korean Peninsula…must take a higher priority than the human rights issue."

Not everyone in South Korea believes that the choice is between peace and human rights. A *Chosun Ilbo* editorial lamented, "It is a moment of shame for South Korea that the Japanese government had to do what would have been our government's job: confirm the fate of one of our own." Still, it is no wonder why photo ops pressing North Korea on human rights issues are harder to arrange in Seoul than in Tokyo. Koreans are focused on reuniting their country, but many also see hypocrisy in Japanese calls for justice when only decades before the North's abductions, Japan was a brutal colonizer in Asia.

Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary (and possibly its next prime minister) Abe Shinzo said that the abduction issue now has "an international stretch," but let us hope that he means something broader than a U.S.-Japan-South Korea alliance targeting North Korea's human rights record. That would drag Washington into a bitter diplomatic and historical argument that it ought to avoid, and which has a better chance of dividing rather than uniting us at this critical time.

The abduction issue is by no means the primary cause for the six-party stalemate over North Korea's nuclear weapons programs, but it is becoming increasingly tangled up in the dialogue, along with North Korea's human rights record and other illicit activities. The sooner we can move these peripheral issues to the UN or other international forums, the better, so that the U.S. can look after its most important interest: halting the proliferation of nuclear weapon states.

The U.S. will never stop speaking out on behalf of human rights, and Washington will have a chance to host its allies during North Korea Freedom Week (April 22 to 30), when family members of Japanese and South Korean abduction victims will testify before Congress for the first time ever. Maybe we can encourage more South Koreans to think more

critically about the human cost of engagement with the North, but we should not lose focus. North Korean denuclearlization is America's primary goal, and a discussion between Japan and Korea on the history of wrongs committed and abductions is too long and too twisted a path toward that objective.

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