



A temporary accord for China and Japan by David Fouse

In a surprise concession to Japan, China has dropped its objection to Tokyo raising the issue of Japanese citizens kidnapped by the North Korean government during the next round of Six-Party Talks. While the gesture will certainly be welcomed in Tokyo, its salutary effect on Sino-Japanese relations will be short lived if it isn't combined with additional diplomatic pressure from China aimed at bringing the North Koreans back to the six-party process for serious talks.

In early July, Japan's call for a binding resolution under chapter 7 of the United Nations charter in the UN Security Council following North Korean missile tests appeared to threaten the recent thaw in Sino-Japanese relations. The first meeting between the two countries' foreign ministers in over a year occurred on May 23; that was followed by Japan's lifting its freeze on yen loans to China on June 6. China's condemnation of Japan's proposed UNSC resolution as an "overreaction" seemed to put the two countries at odds again after a brief, yet significant improvement in their tense relationship.

The two countries appear to have reached a tentative accord with regard to policy on North Korea. Japan has agreed to back China's alternative nonbinding resolution against North Korea in the UNSC and on July 28 Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing approved the inclusion of the abduction issue within the framework of the Six-Party Talks during his meeting with Japanese Foreign Minister Aso Taro on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum.

Li's reminder to Aso during the same meeting that Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's visits to the Yasukuni Shrine remain an obstacle to improved relations indicates that the bilateral relationship remains on rocky ground. Nevertheless, the Chinese concession on the abduction issue, which it had previously dismissed as an unrelated bilateral issue between Japan and North Korea, seems to indicate that Beijing is increasingly concerned about North Korea providing political cover for changes in Japan's politico-military profile. Such changes were highlighted following the missile tests when Japanese political leaders renewed their debate over the need for Japan to create a legal framework that would allow the country to develop the capability to strike missile bases in North Korea if a missile attack was imminent. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu responded to these comments by stating that Japan was "pouring oil on fire" and that these types of threats are "extremely irresponsible and incomprehensible."

A national poll by Japan's *Yomiuri* newspaper shortly after the missile tests indicated that 77 percent of the public felt an increased sense of threat from North Korea and that 90 percent supported Japan's tough UNSC resolution. That sense

of threat translated into 62 percent of the Japanese public favoring speeding up development of Japan's missile defense system and 65 percent supporting the imposition of additional sanctions, in addition to banning the North Korean ferry "Manyongbong" from Japanese ports.

With the presidential elections of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party set for September, the Chinese seem to have decided to attempt to limit Japanese domestic support for further sanctions on North Korea or broader changes in Japan's security policies, such as those advocated by Chief Cabinet Secretary Abe Shinzo, Prime Minister Koizumi's likely successor. Abe, who has a reputation as a hardliner on both North Korea and China, has strongly pushed for Japan to revise its constitution and engage in collective defense agreements.

The Chinese would like to slow – if not stop – the deconstruction of Japan's constitutional restraints on security cooperation as long as possible, especially given Japan's growing interest in the Taiwan issue (as evidenced in the joint statement of common objectives issued by the U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee in February 2005). China expressed "grave concern" over the U.S. and Japan including a reference to Taiwan in their common strategic objectives, with a Foreign Ministry spokesman stating that any "irresponsible remarks" related to China's national defense were "untenable."

Although other factors, such as a desire to continue strengthening economic relations with Japan, may have been involved in China's decision to make the concession on the abduction issue, the timing of this gesture leaves little doubt that the connection between Japan's security transition and North Korean provocations has Beijing on alert.

Still, there is no date for a resumption of the Six-Party Talks and many observers believe that North Korea will wait out the remainder of the Bush administration before engaging in real negotiations, hoping that a change in administration may yield a better deal. Without commitment from all parties involved, there is little reason to believe that Japan will make any headway with the North Koreans on the abduction issue even if the talks do reconvene soon. The positive effect of China's rare concession to the Japanese public will most likely be temporary.

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