



The Abductee Issue is a Test of America's Strategic Credibility by Michael Green and James Przystup

The usual narrative on Japan's role in the Six-Party Talks these days goes something like this:

On Feb. 13, 2007 the Six-Party Talks yielded a new framework with North Korea that marks the first concrete progress on rolling back North Korea's nuclear weapons program. However, the Abe government was an obstacle because of its excessive focus on the fate of the abducted Japanese citizens still unaccounted for in North Korea. Because Abe built his nationalist credentials on this highly emotional issue, the Japanese government was able to demonstrate little flexibility and became isolated in the six-party process. The new prime minister, Fukuda Yasuo, has none of that ideological inflexibility and hopefully will understand that Japan has to prioritize denuclearization over the abductee issue or face isolation in the talks and condemnation for letting a narrow domestic issue obstruct real progress on the Korean Peninsula.

We have both heard some version of that narrative in conferences, the press, and in parts of the U.S. government as Washington gets ready to receive Fukuda on his first visit to the United States as prime minister. We think there is a different narrative that may be much closer to the ground truth. And if Washington fails to understand the implications of this other narrative, we will have serious problems not only in the U.S.-Japan alliance, but in our overall credibility and strategic position in Northeast Asia.

The other narrative goes like this.

On Feb. 13 after bilateral U.S.-DPRK talks, the six parties agreed to a new framework for denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. The Japanese government supported that framework, but quickly grew alarmed at subsequent moves by the U.S. to lower demands on Pyongyang and increase rewards delivered to the North. First, on March 1 Washington announced that it was going to return the money from Banco Delta Asia to the North. When Pyongyang balked at picking up the cash in person and demanded a transfer of funds to its account through a third bank to re-establish its banking credibility, the U.S. agreed. Unable to find a private bank that was willing to make the transfer because of risks associated with handling moneys already designated as laundered by the U.S. Treasury Department, the U.S. government utilized the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, which cannot be sanctioned under U.S. law.

Meanwhile, Japanese expectations that sanctions under UNSC Resolution 1718 would be robustly implemented went unfulfilled because of ongoing diplomacy with North Korea. Other concerns about Washington's new attitude to North Korea accumulated. According to the Feb. 13 agreement,

North Korea is to provide a list of "all its nuclear programs as described in the Joint Statement" (which says "nuclear programs and nuclear weapons"), but it is now an open question whether North Korea's accounting for plutonium will include weapons and locations. *The Washington Post* reports that North Korea will attempt to explain away the highly enriched uranium (HEU) program by claiming in the declaration that the aluminum tubes it procured were intended for non-nuclear purposes, in spite of ample evidence shared with Japan to the contrary.

The disablement of Yongbyon pledged in the February agreement was originally intended to be permanent, but the issue now is how many months it would take for the North to reconstitute the program, raising concerns as to when permanent disablement will actually become permanent.

Finally, the North Korea-Syria connection raises fundamental questions about whether Pyongyang has followed through on the third of its three threats to Jim Kelly in April 2003 (to expand their deterrent, which they did that year; to demonstrate their deterrent, which they did last year; and now to transfer their deterrent). Indeed the Syria connection highlights the issue of verification and the nature of the verification regime to be employed to validate Pyongyang's "full and complete" declaration.

This pattern raises serious concerns in Tokyo about whether North Korea is reaping increased benefits from slowly handing over the decrepit Yongbyon facility, while positioning itself to continue developing its nuclear weapons capability and establishing itself as an accepted nuclear weapons state. The lack of consequences for the October 2006 nuclear test and the absence of sticks in the current policy are particularly frustrating and alarming.

Now add the abductee issue to the mix. In 2003, the U.S. government declared in its annual report on terrorism that lifting North Korea from the list of state sponsors of terror would also require some progress on the abductee issue with Japan. While "progress" was not defined, the policy clearly was not intended for Washington to unilaterally lift the terrorism sanctions on North Korea without working with Tokyo to achieve some measurable and concrete actions by the North. While the North may agree to meetings with the Japanese government, there have been no concrete actions with respect to the still missing Japanese abductees.

Fukuda, though he is more flexible than Abe, will need those concrete steps from North Korea on the abductee issue if he is to sustain public support for the U.S. move on the terrorism list. The worse case scenario would be that the United States keeps its promise to remove North Korea from the list of state sponsors of terror by the end of the year, which would require a 45-day prior notification to Congress, exactly when Fukuda arrives in Washington. President Bush will not

do that to Fukuda. But there is a push to announce the removal of North Korea from the list shortly after Fukuda is out of town.

This second narrative could go in even less positive directions from that point, complicating everything from the debates over host nation support to the transfer of Marines from Okinawa to Guam (a price tag for Japan of billions of dollars). But at its core, the problem is the credibility of the U.S. as an ally in the wake of a nuclear test by North Korea – an event that everybody reading this essay once considered potentially catastrophic for Japan’s strategic position.

The second narrative we have described does not have to become the ground truth. Much will depend on the content of the final step of phase two of the February agreement and the specifics are not clear. Even an incomplete declaration or temporary disablement of Yongbyon is progress and we would applaud it. But the question is what things look like on the other side of the ledger. Did the U.S. cave on core principles? Did Washington expend its credibility for a temporary and highly reversible series of steps by the North? And did the United States betray an important commitment made to an ally in the process?

If the North Korean deliverables are impressive, then the U.S. and the other parties would be right to press Japan to be more flexible. But if those deliverables fall far short of expectations, then the United States would be foolhardy to damage our long-term credibility with a key ally for a symbolic and short-term agreement. Mishandling the issue could hand Pyongyang a major strategic victory – the attenuation of the U.S.-Japan alliance. Either way, the abductee issue should not be discounted in the final calculus.

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