

What Hillary Should Tell Japan by Ayako Doi

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On her first day in office, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton set a refreshing new tone at the State Department by declaring that diplomacy will be the essential U.S. foreign policy tool of the new administration. The point was underscored by President Barack Obama's visit to Foggy Bottom the next day. With multiple wars raging around the world, her tasks are daunting. East Asia, with its relative peace, is certainly not at the top of her priorities. Even so, it is disappointing that she has missed an opportunity to send a message to Japan about a contentious issue that is poisoning trans-Pacific relations.

In a telephone conversation with Foreign Minister Nakasone Hirofumi last Thursday, Clinton said that she would "attach importance to the abduction issue, and share the thinking of the Japanese people," a reference to 17 Japanese citizens kidnapped by North Korean agents in the 1970s and '80s, many of whom remain missing. "I would like the U.S. to cooperate with Japan in resolving this issue," she reportedly said.

Her remarks sound benign, and taken at face value, there is nothing wrong with them. But in Japan's highly charged atmosphere where a great deal of emotion is riding on the issue, they may well be interpreted as an Obama administration promise to link de-nuclearization negotiations with Pyongyang to "progress" on the abduction issue. Reflecting Tokyo's expectations, Nakasone told Clinton, "The abduction issue is highest on our agenda, and I would like to see its resolution carried out together with the nuclear issue."

Since former Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's surprise trip to Pyongyang in September 2002, during which North Korean leader Kim Jong-il admitted that his agents had over the years kidnapped more than a dozen Japanese citizens, U.S. officials have repeatedly told the Japanese that they won't forget the plight of the abductees as they deal with North Korea. In the early days of the Six-Party Talks, the Bush administration even used the heartbreaking tales of the abductee families to discredit Kim Jong-il and to justify its refusal to engage in direct negotiations with Pyongyang on the nuclear weapons issue.

Such expressions of sympathy from U.S. officials inflated Japanese expectations about what Washington can, or will, do to force Pyongyang to produce a full accounting of the abductions, including the return of any who are still alive, and a satisfactory explanation of what happened to those who did not survive. They've also created a pattern of dependency. Rather than calmly analyzing the situation and devising a strategy to bring a realistic closure for this human tragedy,

Koizumi and his successor, Abe Shinzo, banked on Washington to solve it for them. Every time they met with President Bush, his comments were read like tea leaves to analyze the depth of his commitment to the cause. Families of the abductees came to rely on Washington, rather than Tokyo, to be their main advocate in the quest for information about their loved ones. They traveled frequently to Washington to lobby President Bush and members of Congress directly.

But they were dealt a severe setback in 2006, when the Bush administration did an about-face, and opened direct talks with Pyongyang in an effort to strike a deal on denuclearization. Washington continued to pay lip service to Japanese concerns about the abductees, but it was soon clear to everyone, including the Japanese, that the U.S. negotiator was not going to allow the kidnappings that took place long ago and far away to get in the way of negotiations in the here and now about ridding the Korean Peninsula of the nuclear threat.

Over the eight years of the Bush presidency, Japan heeded U.S. requests to provide fuel for allied fleets patrolling the Indian Ocean in support of the war in Afghanistan, and sent ground troops and transport planes to Iraq, in a belief that by taking such steps it could assure that the U.S. would take its side in the dispute with North Korea. The administration's decision to put the nuclear issue ahead of the abductions left many Japanese feeling betrayed. The last straw came this past December, when the administration removed North Korea from the list of countries that support terrorism, despite earnest pleas from Tokyo not to do so -- and as it turned out, with no real assurance from Pyongyang that progress would continue on the nuclear issue.

It is hard to overstate the profound disappointment that a majority of Japanese feel about the new U.S. direction. These days, it's not uncommon to hear the word "distrust" from both ordinary Japanese citizens and government officials asked to describe their feelings toward the U.S. The abduction issue has come to sour the whole bilateral relationship, just when the new U.S. administration needs cooperation from the second largest economy in the world to tackle a whole range of issues around the globe.

In the meantime, the Japanese media has been exploiting the highly emotional nature of the issue for maximum commercial gain, constantly playing up the story and demonizing North Korea. A former Japanese TV reporter who recently spoke at a private meeting in Tokyo said her producers used to relentlessly bug her for "any story" about North Korea. Even when information was unrelated to the abductions, she was told to use it to cast the North Koreans as evil savages. She described how the media executives and leaders of the powerful association of abductee families have created an atmosphere of intimidation in which no rational

discussion of the abduction issue is possible. “Only one opinion is allowed” when it comes to North Korea, the ex-reporter said, and that is to deny aid and refuse to negotiate with Pyongyang until there is a “resolution” on abductions – though no one has been able to explain to the Japanese public exactly what that means.

To be sure, there are some in Japan who see that the obsession with the abduction issue is detrimental to the national interest. But those who try to promote a dialogue with North Korea have found themselves castigated by the media and public opinion. When two of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party’s most senior national security experts, Diet members Kato Koichi and Yamazaki Taku, contradicted Prime Minister Abe and advocated opening a dialogue with Pyongyang, they were labeled as traitors and spies. Former Deputy Foreign Minister Tanaka Hitoshi, who was responsible for arranging Koizumi’s two trips to Pyongyang, was severely criticized for suggesting that the government should not let the abduction issue impede progress on other goals, like denuclearization and normalization. After a bomb was found in his garage, and it turned out to have been planted by a rightwing gangster, Tokyo’s nationalist governor Ishihara Shintaro remarked that Tanaka deserved it.

Because it is so difficult for the Japanese to break away from their current mindset, the only effective way to bring them to their senses, and encourage them to start thinking seriously about where their national interests really lie, is to remove the source of their unrealistic expectation. That is why I think Secretary Clinton made a mistake.

She could have told Foreign Minister Nakasone that she understands the concerns of the abductee families, but that there are other important issues to tackle with North Korea. She might also have added that the U.S. and its partners in the Six-Party Talks have no choice but to proceed, even if Japan refuses to participate in an eventual settlement. She should have suggested, and still can, that the best way to get to the kidnapped Japanese is for Japan to unite with the U.S. and the other members of the talks to work out an acceptable deal with Pyongyang on its nuclear program, and bring North Korea into the community of nations. Only then, will it become possible to pry the truth out of the hermit nation.