

# Japan's North Korea Policy: The Long Swing between Dialogue and Deterrence

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*Paper presented at the conference*

North Korea Policy After The Perry Report:  
A Trilateral (Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States) Workshop

March 3-4, 2000

## Introduction

In September 1990, when Shin Kanemaru, a Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leader and former vice prime minister, and Makoto Tanabe, former secretary-general of the Japan Socialist Party, visited North Korea and issued a joint communiqué with the Korean Workers' Party (KWP), the prospects for normalization of diplomatic relations between Tokyo and Pyongyang appeared very bright. With official ties between the Soviet Union and South Korea close at hand, North Korea coveted relations with Japan. Although the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs was lukewarm to reconciliation talks, public opinion, swayed by the DPRK's recent release of two Japanese seamen, was not overly hostile to rapprochement. Opposition to Kanemaru's initiative came rather from the South Korean and U.S. governments. In Seoul, President Roh Tae Woo, taken aback by the sudden turn of events, feared damage to his *Nordpolitik* policy. U. S. Ambassador to Japan Michael Armacost warned Japanese officials of the a grave danger to nonproliferation posed by the North Korean nuclear-weapons development program, insisting that the DPRK accept inspection of its suspected nuclear facilities before normalization.

Under a cloud from the start, official negotiations between Japan and North were broken off in November 1992, after China and South Korea established diplomatic relations, primarily because of the DPRK' nuclear weapons program, and the following March North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty.

What later was to become the major roadblock to normalization—a series of suspected abductions of Japanese citizens by North Korean agents—was not a factor at the time. Only in February 1997, when the kidnapping of a 13-year-old girl, Megumi Yokota, was confirmed by a former DPRK spy who defected to South Korea, did the suspected abductions begin to attract much attention. For example, after the U.S.-North Korea talks in Geneva produced the 1994 Agreed Framework, former Minister of Foreign Affairs Michio Watanabe headed a Diet delegation from the LDP, JSP, and the New Party Sakigake (Sakigake) to Pyongyang. Japan provided 500,000 tons of food aid, but normalization talks were not resumed.

## Suspected Abductions, 1997-1998

When the three-year mourning period for Kim Il Sung ended in the summer of 1997, Japan and North Korea began to feel each other out on the possibility of resuming negotiations, which had remained suspended since 1992. The first diplomatic contacts were in Beijing in July, an informal meeting between foreign ministry officials at the divisional director level. In August, the contacts became preliminary negotiations between the Deputy Director-General, Asian Affairs Bureau, and his North Korean counterpart. They reached agreement on such matters as early resumption of normalization talks,

visits to Japan by Japanese women married to Koreans and living in North Korea, establishment of a joint liaison committee between the two countries' Red Cross Societies, and an investigation into the status and whereabouts of Japanese citizens in North Korea. The last item referred to an inquiry about 10 Japanese citizens who had disappeared mysteriously and were believed to have been seized by a North Korean intelligence agency in seven incidents dating from the mid-1970s.

Japan-North Korean relations improved in the months following the preliminary negotiations. In October 1977, the Japanese government decided to provide North Korea with food aid worth \$27 million through United Nations' organizations. In November, the first group of Japanese wives were allowed to travel to their homeland. The KWP organ *Nodong Shinmun* editorialized that "The two peoples and the times demand normalization of relations." In November, a delegation of Diet members from the three parties in the coalition government (LDP, the Social Democratic Party of Japan (SDPJ) and Sakigake), headed by Yoshiro Mori, chairman of the LDP Executive Council, visited Pyongyang. They agreed with KWP representatives that inter-governmental negotiations should be resumed promptly. On the issue of suspected abductions, KWP Secretary Kim Yong Sun assured the visitors of an investigation into "missing persons in general." In December, with arrangements completed for a second homecoming trip by Japanese wives, Foreign Minister Keizo Obuchi said: "I hope negotiations for diplomatic normalization will be reopened as soon as possible. Although that cannot be done by the year's end, I hope it will take place very soon."

From February 1998, however, an intense diplomatic tug of war began over the inquiry into the missing Japanese. Presenting no findings from the promised investigation, North Korea started to accuse Japan of making resolution of the "missing persons" a condition for reopening talks. To be sure, in the diplomatic contacts the preceding summer, a solution to the issue was not an explicit prerequisite for negotiations. North Korea may well have concluded that all it had to do to restart normalization talks was permit a visit by Japanese wives and promise to look into the missing persons. Or North Korea may have chose this interpretation as a bargaining tactic. At any rate, to acknowledge anything at that stage would have been tantamount to admitting a state-sponsored crime before the negotiations began. The abductions issue had emerged as an insurmountable obstacle for North Korea.

In Japan, opposition to normalization crystallized in March and April 1998, including a nonpartisan Diet members' league, a 300,000-signature petition drive against talks, a speaking tour by a DPRK defector who said Megumi Yokota was in North Korea, and a full-page advertisement in the New York Times. These activities and extensive media coverage focused attention on the suspected abductions. Meanwhile, in South Korea President Kim Dae Jung had taken office in February, but the intelligence services still adhered to the confrontational policy of his predecessor Kim Young Sam. Not yet firmly enough in control to drop "containment" and implement his Sunshine Policy toward the North, Kim Dae Jung was apprehensive that Japan-North Korea talks would outpace South-North dialogue. Given these circumstances, the Japanese government, although denying that full resolution of the suspected abductions was a precondition, had to insist North Korea give some credible indication of a solution.

Diplomatic contacts were already deadlocked by April 30 when Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto, in his address to the House of Representative's plenary session, urged the "supreme leader of North Korea" to make a sincere effort to solve the abduction issue. On May 8, the *Nodong Shinmun* carried an editorial entitled "Japan's Diplomatic Stance toward Korea" that not only dismissed allegations of wrongdoing as "baseless" but also lambasted Japan for the forced mobilization of Koreans during the colonial period. The DPRK's final response was delivered on June 5 by the North Korean Red Cross Society. A spokesperson announced that "The individuals Japan is looking for are not within

our territory, nor have they entered or stayed temporarily in this country.” On June 9, the same spokesperson announced cancellation of a third homecoming visit by Japanese wives.

Diplomatic contacts had been broken off by August 31 when North Korea launched a Taepodong missile that crossed Japan’s main island and dropped into the Pacific Ocean. Feelings ran very high on both sides of the Japan Sea. On September 1, the Japanese government strongly protested the missile firing and demanded an end to North Korean missile development and exports. At the same time, the Obuchi administration suspended efforts to reopen normalization talks, food aid to North Korea, and contributions to the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization’s (KEDO). The next day, Japan canceled permits for chartered air flights to North Korea. On September 3, both houses of the Diet adopted resolutions protesting the missile launch. There was also an extraordinary public backlash against North Korea. For their part, the North Koreans on September 2 that “it is rash for Japan to say things critical of us when it does not know for sure whether we tested a missile or we did something else.” Two days later, North Korea announced that a “satellite” launch had proven successful.

### **From Deterrence to Dialogue, 1999**

The Taepodong missile had a far-reaching effect on Japan’s security policy. Vulnerability to DPRK missiles, coupled with Pyongyang’s suspected involvement in the disappearance of Japanese citizens and fears of nuclear proliferation, made the government and public acutely aware of the North Korean “threat.” On September 1, the LDP’s foreign affairs and national defense committees jointly adopted a resolution on strengthening the country’s air defense system through stepped-up efforts to develop a theater missile defense (TMD) system and reconnaissance satellites. The LDP called upon the government to draft without delay bills related to the revised Japan-United States guidelines on defense cooperation and other emergency defense bills. The Clean Government Party (CGP), too, demanded that the government freeze normalization talks with North Korea and overhaul the air defense system. The Democratic Party’s attitude was less clear, but spokesman Naoto Kan conceded a need for reconnaissance satellites. In this tense political climate, the Joint Japan-U.S. Consultation Committee on Security agreed in September on joint research to develop a TMD system, and in December the Japanese government decided to acquire an independent satellite-reconnaissance capability.

However, there was a serious flaw in Japan’s single-minded emphasis on deterrence: it ran counter to the South Korean and American policies of dialogue with Pyongyang, in place since mid-1998. For instance, in September high-level U.S.-North Korean talks in Berlin reached a tentative understanding. The Clinton administration promised to start construction of light-water reactors in North Korea and resume the supply of heavy fuel oil. In October, President Kim Dae Jung, his Sunshine Policy now underway, visited Tokyo and secured a promise of close cooperation in dealing with Pyongyang. Given these developments, Japan could not freeze its financial commitment to KEDO. Moreover, following visits to Tokyo and Seoul in December by U.S. Coordinator for North Korean Affairs William Perry, the three countries began to coordinate their North Korea policies more closely, rendering Japan’s other sanctions against the DPRK increasingly inappropriate. In late December, the Foreign Ministry official in charge of North Korea affairs met informally in New York with North Korean diplomats.

By early 1999, Japan’s hard-line policy toward North Korea had changed. In his policy speech to the Diet in January, Prime Minister Obuchi redefined the conditions for reopening normalization talks, stating that “if North Korea responds positively and constructively on matters of international concern and the issues outstanding between Japan and North Korea, Japan is ready to work toward improving relations through dialogue and exchanges.” In response to a question from an opposition Diet member, Obuchi reiterated that Japan was sending a “a strong message to North Korea.” At a Japan-South Korea

Foreign Ministers' Conference in February, Foreign Minister Takamura expressed support for Seoul's "comprehensive approach" to the North and termed Japan's new policy "dialogue and deterrence." It is safe to say that with these remarks by the premier and foreign minister, Japan deferred to the diplomatic efforts of South Korea and the United States and made an overture to North Korea.

To the Japanese government, a "constructive response" by the DPRK entailed three matters: confirmation of no more missile firings; assurance on suspected underground nuclear facilities, and concrete steps on the abduction issue. North Korea was soon to allow an inspection of Kumchang-ni in accordance with the agreement reached with the United States in March and the breakdown in the preliminary negotiations had shown that North Korea would not discuss the matter at an early stage in negotiations. The missile threat is of a different magnitude: the public reaction to another Taepodong would rule out dialogue with North Korea.

Despite signals by the Obuchi administration, a DPRK espionage vessel violated Japan's territorial waters in late March 1999, rekindling suspicion and enmity toward North Korea. Despite this provocation, the Japanese government did not change its position significantly. Indeed, unlike the reaction to the Taepodong missile in August 1998 and despite demands for action from conservative wing of the LDP, no new sanctions were imposed on North Korea. To keep communication open with Pyongyang, the government only dispatched Maritime Self Defense Force's vessels to pursue the North Korea intruder, the maximum possible deterrence available under the law. At a Japan-U.S. summit meeting in early April, Prime Minister Obuchi emphasized to President Bill Clinton Japan's intention to stick with dialogue and deterrence in expectation of a "constructive response" from North Korea.

William Perry went to Pyongyang in May, however, North Korea nixed a proposed visit in June by a multi-party Diet group led by former Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama. There was no sign of a return to dialogue until August 10 when the DPRK issued a policy statement that laid out three principles: 1) Japan must abandon its attempt to crush North Korea; 2) Japan should sincerely apologize and pay compensation for its past criminal acts; and 3) If Japan chose a showdown by force, North Korea would take appropriate measures in response. After this salvo, the statement called upon Japan to "establish good neighborly relations through atonement for the past" and urged Japan "to choose the path of reason." In Tokyo, the foreign ministry's informal reply was that "North Korea is asking for dialogue, and Japan has no reason to refuse."

Not surprisingly, after the U.S.- North Korea Berlin accord and the DPRK Foreign Ministry announced suspension of missile tests, Japan and North Korea moved to reopen negotiations. At a press conference following his address to the UN General Assembly on September 25, North Korean Foreign Minister Paek Nam Jun said that North Korea was ready to negotiate "if Japan atones for its past crimes and compensates for the damages." Japanese and North Korean foreign ministry officials met informally in Singapore October 18-20. Although no details were released, the two sides apparently agreed to pick up where they left off in August 1997. The diplomats may have also achieved an understanding on how to deal with the abductions, the most daunting barrier to normalization.

On December 1-3, a multi-party Diet mission headed by Murayama Tomiichi held discussions in Pyongyang with leaders of the KWP. Seven parties were represented, including the Democratic Party and the Japan Communist Party, as well as independent Diet members. Former Chief Cabinet Secretary Hiromu Nonaka of the LDP served as executive secretary. The purpose of the visit, said Murayama, was to "create an environment conducive to the smooth progress of inter-governmental negotiations for diplomatic normalization." According to the joint statement released on December 3, the two sides agreed to encourage their respective governments to resume negotiations soon. Humanitarian issues

should be addressed through national Red Cross Societies with cooperation from both governments, the parties said. DPRK Foreign Minister Kim Yong Sun reportedly acceded to Murayma's suggestion on concurrent resolution of these issues. The missile question, deemed part of the agenda for governmental talks, was not taken up.

The discussions went well because the two sides were in agreement on unconditional resumption of negotiations and because abductions, homecoming trips by Japanese wives, and food aid were lumped together as humanitarian issues. Kim Yong Sun objected to the term "abductions," but promised a new inquiry. The North Koreans wanted food aid before resumption of talks; the Japanese delegation insisted on linking humanitarian issues and made no commitment on food aid. However, in all probability, an understanding was reached on these issue prior to the delegation's trip. During the preceding year, LDP Diet member Masaaki Nakayama, acting on Hiromu Nonaka's instructions, met several times with North Korean officials in Pyongyang and Beijing. Japan's foreign ministry, too, had fully supported a Diet delegation since the meeting with North Korean diplomats in Singapore.

The remaining sanctions against North Korea were lifted by December 14, and representatives from the Japanese and North Korean Red Cross Societies met in Beijing December 19-21. After very contentious discussions, the two sides agreed on four points: 1) resumption of visits by Japanese wives; 2) a "thorough" investigation into "missing Japanese;" 3) provision of food aid on a humanitarian basis; and 4) an inquiry by Japan into the fate of Koreans missing since before World War II. On December 21-22, senior officials from the Foreign Ministry's Asian Affairs Bureau met with their North Korean counterparts, confirmed the agreement between the multi-party delegation and the KWP, and said diplomatic normalization talks should resume in the near future. However, because there was sharp division over abductions and missile development, another round of preliminary meetings will be held in the new year.

### **2000: The Last Chance or the Lost Chance?**

Buoyed by both the Berlin agreement between Washington and Pyongyang and the Perry Report, the Obuchi administration is about to start normalization talks. For several years Japan's policy on North Korea has swung back and forth like a pendulum, on the one hand impelled by domestic political interests that demand answers on missing Japanese citizens before resumption of negotiations or supplying food to North Korea, and on the other external pressure to cooperate with KEDO and to reopen talks with North Korea. At long last, the government seems to have decided to act in concert with South Korea and the United States. Unlike in 1991-92, when Japan's initiative sparked great anxiety in South Korea and the United States, this time its actions are part of the Perry process and to be carried out in collaboration with Washington and Seoul. The Foreign Ministry has established a special line of command for negotiations with North Korea: from Administrative Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Kawashima to Director-General of the Asian Affairs Bureau Ueda to Councilor of the Asian Affairs Bureau Sasaki and down to Director of the Northeast Asian Division Kazuyoshi Umemoto.

If a high-ranking North Korean official visits Washington and the two countries announce the opening of liaison offices, the impact in Japan will be strong enough to reopen talks with the DPRK. However, this will mark the high-water point of international leverage. Even if a new round of U.S.-North Korea talks gets underway, the United States will find it virtually impossible to prevent Pyongyang from developing and exporting missiles. Taepodongs are North Korea's most precious bargaining chip; the regime will never give them up until its anxieties about security are put to rest. Meanwhile, as the presidential election draws near, the White House will see concession to the DPRK as too risky. One scenario is that as U.S.-North Korea negotiations lose steam, Japan-North Korea talks

will slow down. Yet it is also conceivable that the Clinton administration, troubled at the prospect of an impasse with North Korea might, in concert with South Korea, encourage Japan to push ahead.

At any rate, the most important and difficult issues for Japan are the abductions and the North Korean missile threat. Unless these are settled, no attempt to atone for colonial rule and forge diplomatic relations will have popular support in Japan. Talking to Pyongyang about the missing Japanese citizens is like negotiating the release of hostages, with about zero possibility that the DPRK will be forthcoming early in the process. But ascertaining the fate of these people must be an integral part of normalization talks.

Regarding long-range ballistic missiles, the only viable means of arms control seems to be through expanded and tightened multilateral control arrangements and confidence-building measures, perhaps by first having both Koreas join the Missile Technology Regime and then establish a regional arms control regime. As a first step toward this end, one goal in normalization talks should be to dissuade North Korea from deploying missiles targeted at Japan.

A diplomatic settlement between Japan and North Korea would ring down the curtain on the Cold War in Northeast Asia. Cross-recognition of North and South Korea would proceed apace and capital and technology would pour into the North. Detente would generate momentum for U.S.-North Korea ties and the South-North dialogue, ending the DPRK's isolation from the international community and encouraging peace and stability in the region.

For this cornucopia to spill out, however, Japan and North Korea must find a way to resolve simultaneously an array of issues from retribution for the past, abductions and food aid, to nuclear weapons and missiles. The agenda for normalization talks—the order of topics, the procedures to be followed—are enormously important. North Korea's demand for an apology and compensation will be accommodated as part of the overall process of normalization.

In summary, diplomatic success hinges upon four elements : a positive response from North Korea; a favorable international environment; public support in Japan; and competent leadership. The ongoing Perry process, with its inclusive approach to nuclear weapons, missiles, and improved relations with the DPRK, has benefitted the Japanese government. Yet the abductions and missile threat have hardened Japanese public opinion against North Korea and the negotiations. To change the national mood in Japan, some kind of breakthrough is needed that only North Korea can provide. Otherwise, neither the Obuchi administration nor the Foreign Ministry can overcome the obstacles at home and abroad. With a coalition cabinet in power and a general election coming up, temporizing is more expedient than bold leadership. Several opportunities have already been lost to delay, and time is not on the side of diplomatic success.