

# EAST ASIA INSIGHTS

## TOWARD COMMUNITY BUILDING

**JCIE** Japan Center for International Exchange

Vol. 1 No. 3 | June 2006

## Japan's Perspective on the Korean Peninsula

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The situation on the Korean peninsula today poses a serious danger to the delicate stability in North-east Asia. North Korea's suspected nuclear weapons program; its threatening missile program; its serious criminal misconduct, including abductions of foreign nationals, drug trafficking, and currency counterfeiting; and its worsening domestic humanitarian situation have created deep concern among all in the region. [At the time this edition of *East Asia Insights* was going to press, North Korea was threatening to test a long-range Taepodong missile. Such an action would, of course, have dramatic implications for Japan and the region and would alter the scenarios presented here.]

One of the countries most vitally concerned with developments on the peninsula is Japan, whose own legacy with the Koreans and the Cold War has led to a peculiar and uncomfortable relationship with North Korea. Of the more than 600,000 ethnic Koreans living in Japan today, it is estimated that one half maintain allegiance to the North Korean government. Yet despite the presence of this sizeable ethnic population, North Korea remains the only country in the world with which Japan has no formal relations.

Japan has a long but failed history of negotiations with North Korea dating back to 1992. Then, in 2002, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visited North Korea and took a significant step toward dialogue on normalization with the signing

of the Pyongyang Declaration. Although that declaration set out commitments for normalization, it has yet to result in the resolution of two key pending issues: nuclear weapons development and the past abductions of Japanese nationals. These remain the major impediments to improving bilateral relations, and talks remain stalled today.

Multilateral engagement with North Korea through the six-party talks is also at a standstill. The Joint Statement that was released after the talks' fourth round in September 2005 defined several shared objectives, but it did not detail a plan for implementing them. This, in conjunction with North Korea's recent refusal to return to talks until the United States unfreezes North Korean assets in Macau—assets that American officials suspect were used for money laundering activities—has signaled that the talks are a long way from achieving their objective of improving regional stability.

At this juncture, Japan and the international community need to take a fresh look at how to proceed. Success in renewing dialogue will require a critical examination of the perspectives and goals of all parties involved.

### Japan's Policy on North Korea

Japan's security policy has evolved in direct response to developments surrounding North Korea. The Mutual Security Assistance Pact of 1952 between

the United States and Japan and the subsequent Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security of 1960 are two such examples. Events of the recent past have shown that North Korea continues to be a priority security issue for Japan. The North Korean nuclear crisis of 1993–1994 and the missile crisis of 1998 were two sources of urgent concern among Japanese policymakers.

The nuclear crisis in particular revealed that Japan was not prepared to handle such an event, and the government later acted to create policy to meet this need. The crisis led the international community in 1994 to consider applying sanctions against North Korea, which in response announced that it would interpret sanctions to be an act of war. As the United States began to prepare for a contingency, it expected Japan to make a substantial contribution. But Japanese institutions, beginning with the Self-Defense Forces, did not possess the legal framework to permit engagement, particularly in logistical support operations.

The Japanese government reacted to these regional developments and contingency shortcomings in several ways. First, in 1997 it formulated the Defense Cooperation Guidelines with the United States, clearly outlining Japan's responsibilities in the event of a regional contingency, and it created laws to implement the guidelines. Second, it enacted wartime legislation. Third, it developed a missile-defense program in coordination with the United States. This multifaceted response shows that Japan's security policy over the past decade has been shaped greatly by the threat posed by North Korea.

Japan's policy was not limited to simply increasing deterrence measures, however. The evolution of two bilateral relationships in the region also opened up opportunities for negotiations between Japan and North Korea. Former South Korean President Kim Dae-jong's pursuit of the Sunshine Policy created an environment where Japan could engage in substantive dialogue with North Korea. Perhaps more significantly, the United States' reversal of its policy of engagement with North Korea opened up a new space for dialogue. President Bush's "axis of evil" remarks during his State of the Union address in 2002 and his administration's aversion to the 1994 Agreed Framework

aroused grave concern in the North Korean government. Faced with a hostile U.S. administration and having seen U.S. military capabilities play out in Iraq, North Korea sought to improve relations with Japan to help ensure against the perceived possibility of coercive measures. Better relations with the United States' closest ally could help deter military action.

Japan seized this opportunity to attempt anew to resolve outstanding issues with North Korea, and it did so for several reasons. First, while extensive contingency preparations are necessary for national defense, they cannot solve various security issues; normalizing relations and building confidence are much more desirable outcomes. Second, normalization with North Korea remains an international obligation for Japan, as defined in the San Francisco Peace Treaty. Third, rapprochement between the United States and North Korea during the Clinton administration years had meant that the latter had no strategic motivation to engage with Japan. As U.S. policy changed and North Korea became receptive to Japan, Japan saw a valuable opportunity to resolve outstanding bilateral issues.

The results of the negotiations were reflected in the 2002 Pyongyang Declaration, which was signed during Koizumi's visit. The declaration affirmed the ultimate goal of normalized relations, set out a roadmap outlining the need to resolve various security issues, and recognized that after normalization both parties will "mutually waive all their property and claims and those of their nationals that had arisen from causes which occurred before August 15, 1945." Significantly, during Koizumi's visit, Kim Jong-il apologized for past abductions that North Korea had not acknowledged for decades, and he promised an investigation and the return of survivors. Although several survivors subsequently returned to Japan, talks since the declaration have yet to produce any further progress on outstanding issues.

Ironically, Kim Jong-il's admission of the existence of abductees, coupled with growing domestic nationalism, sparked intense anti-North Korean sentiment in Japan. Public opinion became even more critical in 2005, when supposed forensic evidence of allegedly deceased Japanese abductees provided by North Korean authorities turned

out to be fabricated. Yet, despite this extremely negative public reaction and calls for a tougher approach, Koizumi has maintained his policy of a comprehensive resolution of outstanding issues through engagement with North Korea.

### **Stakeholders in the Six-Party Talks**

Like Japan's bilateral efforts, the six-party talks have yet to produce substantive results. The talks have failed to date in part because North Korean negotiators are bound by a centralized, "military-first" decision-making structure that depends on the approval of Kim Jong-il and the military for every foreign relations decision. Currently, North Korea is feeling particularly vulnerable and wary of foreign motives, and it will continue to wait for assurances before making concessions or agreeing to return to the talks.

North Korean intentions in the six-party talks are clear: to ensure survival of the current regime. Under its military-first policy, North Korea behaves more tactically than strategically. For example, the leadership will make a threatening statement about nuclear capabilities and then base its subsequent actions on the responses it receives from others. It appears that only when the military leadership has a sufficient guarantee for survival does it act strategically. Past strategic decisions include addressing the abduction issue with Japan and participating in the six-party process. It would be reasonable to assume, then, that North Korea is quite capable of making strategic decisions—including decisions on abductions and the nuclear issue—if the military leadership judges that such decisions ensure the regime's survival.

China's main priority is to avert an intensification of regional tensions, as that would hurt its domestic economic growth. The effect that destabilization could have on China's large ethnic Korean border population is also of concern to Beijing. It does not want to see reunification, as a united peninsula could mean a larger, more advanced, democratic presence in the region. China is against North Korea's acquisition of nuclear weapons because of the destabilization that would ensue; it is especially concerned that a nuclearized North Korea could prompt Japan to pursue a weapons program in response.

For South Korea, nationalism is understandably the key element driving its policy on North Korea; South Koreans overwhelmingly view those in the north as their own and understand reunification as a long-term goal. The high expense and difficulty of the German experience, however, has made many Koreans doubtful of early reunification.

In the United States, two major fissures exist over policy on North Korea. The first is between fundamentalists and realists. The former contend that North Korea is a rogue state with which no deals should be made, and that the best options are either containment until the regime collapses or preemptive force. The latter contend that the use of force is too costly both in terms of physical resources and the impact it would have on the geopolitical situation in the region, and that the best option is settlement through negotiation. The second fissure is between those who cast North Korea as part of a group of states that wish to proliferate weapons of mass destruction and those who see the North's nuclear ambitions as part of a geopolitical security issue. Competition between these various factions has gradually hindered progress in the talks.

Russia's interest in the six-party talks is more muted than that of the other five parties, although it too has a strong interest in promoting a peaceful resolution to the nuclear issue. Nevertheless, its presence as a major power in the region remains an important part of the six-party framework.

### **The Way Forward**

Three possible scenarios for North Korea exist at this important juncture. First, the status quo could be maintained. This is perhaps the most dangerous scenario, for the longer the present impasse continues, the more time North Korea will have to develop nuclear weapons and become a de facto nuclear state. The longer North Korea continues to suffer economic difficulties arising from the status quo, the greater the temptation will become for the regime to sell nuclear material to terrorist groups. Japan is vigorously seeking to avoid an indefinite extension of the status quo, particularly since it is the country most vulnerable to a nuclear attack from North Korea.

The second scenario is a shift from dialogue in the six-party talks to condemnation and

sanctions imposed either by the United Nations Security Council or—if sanctions are vetoed there—by like-minded countries. This is also an undesirable scenario for two reasons. First, sanctions, which are imposed in order to modify aberrant behavior, would do little to modify North Korea's policy as it has managed to survive in near-complete economic isolation for decades. Second, without the full cooperation of all relevant countries—including China, North Korea's most important ally—a sanctions regime could not possibly change North Korea's behavior. The only plausible situation under which the international community would have to resort to sanctions would be if North Korea were to test a nuclear weapon or sell nuclear material.

The most desirable scenario is a comprehensive solution achieved through dialogue. The scope of a resolution emerging from dialogue would need to go beyond the 1994 U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework, which lacked a precise roadmap for implementation and verification measures for the resolution of nuclear issues. The Six-Party Joint Statement of September 2005, which outlines clear, comprehensive commitments by all parties, could serve as a starting place. A new resolution could build upon the statement's commitments by including specific measures for implementation and follow-up.

This outcome would be possible if the United States were to engage seriously with North Korea under the umbrella of the six-party talks and if the North Korean military leadership were to unconditionally endorse its own participation in the talks.

It is essential that the United States recognize three key elements if negotiations are to have any success. First, a sufficiently senior-level envoy operating under the direct authority of the president of the United States is most desirable,

as the leaders of the military-first regime view the presidency as the only source of authority in the United States. Second, given the strong suspicions held by the North Korean regime, the United States should be prepared for intensive negotiations. Third, in terms of substance, the success of the talks clearly rests on the nature of the security guarantee that the United States provides to North Korea. Under the military-first regime, North Korea tends to be deeply suspicious of any promises made by other countries, particularly the United States; an appropriate device needs to be found here. Under certain circumstances, it may make sense to create a framework where security would be collectively guaranteed by the six parties, possibly utilizing the authority of the United Nations Security Council. In return, North Korea would permit precise, independent verification of the abandonment of nuclear programs and settlement of outstanding issues.

Consideration must also be given to the future role of the six-party talks, since any stable regional architecture requires participation by all vital stakeholders. In this sense, if the six-party process proves successful, steps must be taken to ensure that it is transformed into a semi-permanent regional entity. Under such an arrangement, the talks' supervisory format would be transformed into a political format. It would build confidence and support a dialogue on lasting peace and stability in the region, a shared commitment that already exists in the Joint Statement. The true resolution of the question of North Korea, however, may entail a longer process in which the North Korean regime transforms its policies thoroughly. The six-party entity could ensure that the process takes place, and it could additionally promote stability by negotiating and facilitating economic cooperation and institutional capacity building in Northeast Asia.

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## *East Asia Insights*

*East Asia Insights* is an occasional newsletter focusing on East Asia community building from a Japanese perspective.

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