



11

Japan and North Korea

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Introduction

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, hereinafter, North Korea) is the only member of the United Nations with which Japan does not maintain diplomatic relations. After 35 years of Japan's colonial rule over the Korean Peninsula, which lasted until 1945, Japan normalized its diplomatic relations with the Republic of Korea (South Korea) in 1965. Yet, more than half a century later, the relationship between Japan and North Korea remains fraught, plagued by numerous unresolved issues and mutual distrust, with no prospects for improvement on the horizon.

However, there have been moments in the past when Japan and North Korea approached each other with a view toward normalizing diplomatic relations. This article looks back on the trajectory and context in which efforts by the two countries to draw closer were, despite initial promises, ultimately thwarted. In particular, it delves into the factors that led to a significant deterioration in relations between the two nations after the signing of the Japan-North Korea Pyongyang Declaration in 2002. Additionally, it provides a discussion on the current state of Japan-North Korea relations under the Suga and Kishida administrations.

Historical context

The first period in which Japan and North Korea sought to move closer

to each other came in the mid-1950s, during the Cold War. Following the death of the Soviet Union's supreme leader, Joseph Stalin, in March 1953, a mood of peaceful coexistence emerged between the United States and the Soviet Union. This, in turn, improved relations between Japan and the Soviet Union and so fostered an atmosphere conducive to Japan and North Korea also drawing closer to each other. At the time, the newly established North Korean state was heavily influenced by the Soviet Union, a fact that serves as a backdrop to these developments. In February 1955, North Korea's Foreign Minister Nam Il conveyed to Japan that North Korea was prepared "to discuss in detail various issues concerning the establishment and development of relations with Japan." In response to this overture, trade between Japan and North Korea expanded under the administration of Prime Minister Ichiro Hatoyama, and direct shipping routes between the two countries were established. In December 1959, a repatriation program for Koreans residing in Japan commenced, resulting in the migration of nearly 100,000 Korean residents in Japan and their Japanese spouses to North Korea, an exodus from a capitalist to a socialist country whose scale is unparalleled in history.

However, the landscape shifted significantly in May 1961 when Park Chung-hee, a military officer, seized power in South Korea. Following this development, Japan-South Korea relations advanced,

and in June 1965, the Treaty on Basic Relations Between Japan and the Republic of Korea confirmed South Korea as the “only lawful Government” on the Korean Peninsula. Consequently, Japan-North Korea relations rapidly cooled. In the context of the Cold War, it proved challenging for Japan to establish amicable relations with both North and South Korea.

A second period emerged towards the end of the 1960s, coinciding with the *détente* between the United States and the Soviet Union and the rapprochement between the United States and China. Particularly influenced by the Sino-American developments, Japan and China also rapidly drew closer to each other, resulting in the normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and China in September 1972. In Japan, this context gave rise to a sentiment that favored placing importance on relations with North Korea, China’s ally. This sentiment led to a flurry of visits to North Korea by Japanese journalists and politicians and the establishment of the Parliamentarians’ League for the Promotion of Friendship between Japan and North Korea. However, this swift rapprochement between Japan and North Korea proved to be an unpalatable development for South Korea, which had just normalized its diplomatic relations with Japan. North Korea demanded that Japan adopt an equidistant diplomacy between North and South Korea, but Japan did not comply with this request, instead advocating for the gradual build-up of exchanges in economic,

cultural, and humanitarian fields.

It is worth noting that, up until the 1970s, the Japanese public held a generally favorable image of North Korea. Even conservative media outlets reported positively on North Korea’s “economic development.” Notably, in October 1971, Ryokichi Minobe, the Governor of Tokyo, visited North Korea and met with Prime Minister Kim Il-sung. During this visit, Minobe went so far as to unabashedly praise Kim Il-sung, declaring, “In the competition between capitalism and socialism, one has only to observe the current situation in Pyongyang to reach a clear conclusion. We discussed that it is evident that capitalism is losing.”

A third period can be situated around the time of the end of the Cold War. In July 1988, South Korean President Roh Tae-woo declared, “We are willing to co-operate with North Korea in its efforts to improve relations with countries friendly to us, including the United States and Japan; and in parallel with this, we will continue to seek improved relations with the Soviet Union, China, and other socialist countries.” For Japan, the implication of this statement was that South Korea would not oppose the normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and North Korea.

In the face of the impending collapse of socialist regimes around the world, North Korea sought to improve its relations with Japan as a way to navigate through this critical situation. On

the Japanese side, as well, there was a desire to advance the normalization of diplomatic relations with North Korea as a final step in resolving the issues that had remained outstanding since the war. In September 1990, both the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the main opposition party, the Japan Socialist Party (JSP), dispatched a high-level delegation to Pyongyang. The delegation reached an agreement with the Workers' Party of Korea that "diplomatic relations should be established as soon as possible," followed in January 1991 by the initiation of formal negotiations for the normalization of diplomatic relations between the two governments.

However, the normalization talks suffered a significant setback after suspicions arose concerning the involvement of North Korean agents in the November 1987 bombing of Korean Air Flight 858. Suspicion emerged that a woman, who was alleged to have taught Japanese to the North Korean operatives responsible for the bombing, might herself be a Japanese national abducted by North Korea. This development led to the breakdown of the normalization negotiations during the 8th round of talks in November 1992. At this time, suspicions were also emerging regarding North Korea's nuclear development. While the Japanese side insisted on a comprehensive resolution that included the nuclear issue, the North Korean side was entirely unresponsive, further complicating the background of the negotiations.

The fourth turning point arrived with Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visit to North Korea on September 17, 2002. Until that point, attempts at rapprochement between Japan and North Korea had largely been linked with trends in international politics and moves by the major powers. However, the approach taken in 2002 was distinctive in that not only did Japan and North Korea mutually and proactively seek a rapprochement but they did so by advancing negotiations in which both governments played a central role, as distinct from the party-to-party diplomacy that had been practiced until that time.

A significant factor behind Koizumi's achievement of the first-ever Japan-North Korea summit was the fact that the issue of the abductions of Japanese nationals by North Korea had become a national concern in Japan. In pre-summit administrative negotiations, the North Korean side reported that of the abductees, "eight had died, five were alive, and one had never entered the country." Kim Jong-il, North Korea's supreme leader, apologized to Koizumi during the summit, explaining that "in the 1970s and early 1980s, our special forces were carried away by a reckless quest for glory."

The Japan-North Korea Pyongyang Declaration, signed by both leaders at this juncture, was a groundbreaking agreement encompassing various issues. It committed to the commencement of discussions for the resumption of

negotiations for the normalization of diplomatic relations; Japan's expression of "deep remorse and heartfelt apology" for its colonial rule; the initiation of specific consultations by Japan to implement grant aid and low-interest loans following the normalization of diplomatic relations; the initiation of specific consultations by both parties to renounce property and claims that had arisen before the end of World War II; North Korea's commitment to measures preventing the recurrence of issues of concern affecting the lives and security of Japanese nationals; adherence by both parties to all international agreements related to nuclear issues; and North Korea's intention to extend the moratorium on missile launches in and after 2003.

Reflecting on Japan's colonial rule of the Korean Peninsula before World War II, Japan provided South Korea with economic cooperation amounting to 500 million US dollars at the time of the normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and South Korea in 1965. It was a shared understanding between Japan and North Korea that a similar financial provision would be made if diplomatic relations with North Korea were normalized. Prior to this point, North Korea had insisted that these funds be referred to as "compensation" or "reparations," but in the declaration, North Korea made a concession to Japan's position.

North Korea, which until then had dismissed the abduction issue as a

"fabrication by the Japanese government," dramatically changed its stance. Some of the factors underlying Kim Jong-il personally apologizing to Japan during the summit are believed to be North Korea's desire to leverage economic cooperation from Japan as a catalyst for its own economic development, as well as its hope to approach negotiations with the United States through Japan.

At the end of September 2002, when a Japanese government investigation team visited North Korea, the North Korean authorities provided explanations for the deaths of eight individuals, attributing them to gas poisoning, traffic accidents, drowning, and suicide. In Japan, this sparked intense backlash due to the perceived implausibility of these explanations, with many critics noting that "there are too many unnatural points." On the other hand, the five individuals who were confirmed to be alive were repatriated to Japan on October 15 of that year. By the end of October, negotiations for the normalization of Japan-North Korea relations resumed in Kuala Lumpur, but they were once again interrupted due to friction over allowing the families of the already repatriated abductees to return to Japan. The Japanese government lacked the leeway to choose actions that could be perceived by its citizens as weak.

Although the North Korean side repeatedly insisted that "the abduction issue has been resolved," in an effort

to break the impasse, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi made a second visit to Pyongyang on May 22, 2004. At the 2nd Japan-North Korea summit, Japan promised to provide 250,000 tons of food aid through international organizations and medical assistance equivalent to 10 million US dollars. In response, Kim Jong-il permitted the repatriation of three family members of the abductees. Kim Jong-il also committed to “going back to square one and reopening the investigation” into the safety and whereabouts of the other abductees. Although North Korea did later report back on the reopened investigation, it did not provide any concrete evidence or documents to substantiate its findings.

In June 2008, at a Japan-North Korea working-level meeting held in Beijing, North Korea promised to conduct another investigation into the abduction issue, and both sides agreed that results would be produced by the fall of that year. However, as Japan continued to see frequent changes in its prime minister, North Korea effectively reneged on its agreement.

At the end of 2011, Kim Jong-il passed away in North Korea, with the regime passing into the hands of his son, Kim Jong-un. In Japan, at the end of 2012, Shinzo Abe, who had shown a strong interest in the abduction issue, was returned to the position of Prime Minister and expressed his determination to resolve the issue during his tenure. Prior to this, in August 2012, the

Red Cross societies of both countries held their first official talks in a decade in Beijing. The discussions were focused on collecting the remains of Japanese nationals who had died in North Korea and arranging for their family members to visit the graves. During the chaos at the end of the Pacific War, many Japanese nationals, including refugees from Manchuria, were stranded on the Korean Peninsula. Consequently, although the Japanese government had been conducting operations to collect the remains of war dead in other regions, it had been unable to do so in North Korea, the presumed resting place of a significant number of Japanese nationals.

North Korea adopted a cooperative stance, including permitting the entry of Japanese family members to visit graves. At Director-General level talks between the foreign ministries of both countries, held in Ulaanbaatar in November 2012, both sides agreed to work together on the issue of collecting the remains of Japanese nationals. They also reached a consensus on continuing discussions regarding the abduction issue.

Subsequently, in May 2014, Japan and North Korea reached a comprehensive agreement in Director-General level talks held in Stockholm, Sweden. North Korea declared its intention to “conduct comprehensive and full-scale investigations concerning all Japanese nationals, with the ultimate goal of resolving all issues related to Japanese nationals.”

In response, Japan signaled its policy to partially lift sanctions on North Korea. In July 2014, at Director-General level talks in Beijing, North Korea informed the Japanese side of the makeup of its fact-finding committee, which was reported to include members from the Ministry of State Security, the Ministry of Social Security, and the Ministry of Defense, among others. It was planned that the committee would be organized into four subcommittees, which would address the issues of abductees, missing persons, the remains of Japanese nationals, and remaining Japanese nationals and Japanese spouses. The “missing persons” category includes individuals whom Japan cannot rule out as having potentially been abducted, while the “remaining Japanese nationals and Japanese spouses” refers to individuals who did not repatriate to Japan after the end of the war, as well as Japanese women who accompanied their Korean husbands from Japan as part of repatriation programs that began in the late 1950s.

However, in response to North Korea’s 4th nuclear test in January 2016 and its launch of what was effectively a long-range ballistic missile the following month, the Japanese government announced a set of enhanced sanctions, including the reinstatement of previously lifted sanctions and new measures such as a fundamental prohibition on money transfers to North Korea. In retaliation, North Korea announced the complete suspension of its investigations regarding Japanese nationals

and the disbandment of the special fact-finding committee. Subsequently, the mutual distrust between Japan and North Korea deepened, leading to a continued stalemate between the two countries.

North Korea nevertheless persisted in conducting nuclear tests and missile launch experiments, prompting Prime Minister Abe to harden his stance, stating, “What is needed is not dialogue, but pressure,” and “dialogue for the sake of dialogue is meaningless.” However, in a significant shift that began in May 2019, Abe began to advocate for “unconditional dialogue.” This pivot came after US and South Korean leaders had held multiple meetings with Kim Jong-un, and public opinion in Japan became increasingly polarized between those emphasizing “pressure” on North Korea and those advocating for “dialogue.”

From 2018 to 2019, Kim Jong-un launched a diplomatic offensive, engaging in three summit meetings with US President Donald Trump, five with Chinese President Xi Jinping, and three with South Korean President Moon Jae-in. Nevertheless, he consistently ignored Prime Minister Abe’s proposal for “unconditional dialogue.” Nevertheless, given Abe’s frequent vows that he would personally ensure the return of all abductees, it was clear that he would not take part in a summit meeting without the prospect of progress on the abduction issue, a fact that was undoubtedly recognized by North Korea.

In other words, just as Japan has harbored increasing distrust toward North Korea over the issues of abductions, nuclear weapons, and missiles, North Korea has also grown increasingly distrustful of Japan. Abe, who garnered national popularity with his strong condemnation of North Korea over the abduction issue and his implementation of unilateral sanctions and hardline measures, was perceived by North Korea as lacking the will to make conciliatory moves toward resolving the abduction issue. Instead, North Korea saw him as merely using this issue for domestic political gain. In the end, despite prioritizing the abduction issue as his “highest priority,” Abe not only failed to secure the repatriation of any abductees but also did not manage to hold a single summit meeting with North Korea. He ultimately stepped down from his position as Prime Minister without making any apparent progress on these issues.

Current situation and challenges

With Abe’s sudden resignation during the COVID-19 pandemic, Yoshihide Suga, who explicitly declared his intention to continue Abe’s policies, took over the post of Prime Minister of Japan. Although Suga, like his predecessor, identified the abduction issue as its “highest priority,” his policy towards North Korea did not exhibit any distinctive features. Meanwhile, consumed with the response to the COVID-19

pandemic, his government was unable to devote significant attention to Japan-North Korea relations.

Like Abe, Suga repeatedly issued strong condemnations of North Korea over the issues of abductions, nuclear weapons, and missile tests. On the other hand, Kim Jong-un has not once made direct reference to the Japanese government in his New Year’s speeches or other public addresses. While North Korean media continue to unleash criticism toward Japan, the sources of these statements are not high-ranking officials like Kim Yo-jong or Kim Yong-chol, who are often involved in critiquing the United States and South Korea. Instead, the criticisms are at most attributed to individuals with titles such as “researcher at the Japan Research Institute” or “spokesperson for the Korean Olympic Committee.” This current posture of North Korea implies that it does not regard Japan as a significant negotiating partner.

While Japan-North Korea relations have remained at a standstill for an extended period, China’s GDP has grown to three times that of Japan, once the world’s second-largest economy, while South Korea’s per capita income has caught up with that of Japan. From North Korea’s perspective, it would naturally be more expedient to secure a partial lifting of economic sanctions from the United States and to obtain aid from China and South Korea rather than pinning its hopes on potential financial assistance funds from Japan that would

accompany the normalization of diplomatic relations.

For a long time, Japan's diplomacy toward North Korea has essentially been a matter under the exclusive control of the Prime Minister. However, even back-channel contact was scarce under the Suga administration. The Japanese family members of the abductees are aging, and there is a growing concern that the issue of abductions may be fading from public consciousness.

The administration of Fumio Kishida, which was inaugurated in October 2021, has also adhered to the policy of "unconditional dialogue," and there has been no significant change in Japan's policy towards North Korea. The Prime Minister's Office website states: "The abductions issue, which is a top priority for the administration, is a humanitarian issue with a time constraint. There is no time to lose before we resolve the abductions issue. We will boldly take every possible action to realize the return of all abductees at the earliest possible date. [Prime Minister Kishida is] determined to meet with Chairman Kim Jong-un face to face, without any conditions." It also declares, "Japan seeks to normalize its relations with North Korea, in accordance with the Japan-DPRK Pyongyang Declaration, through comprehensively resolving outstanding issues of concern such as the abductions, nuclear and missile issues as well as settlement of the unfortunate past."

In May 2022, a conservative government led by Yoon Suk Yeol came to power in South Korea, the first in five years. This development could potentially make it easier for Japan, the United States, and South Korea to align their stances and focus on applying pressure on North Korea. However, in response to this shift, North Korea has heightened its vigilance. Consequently, whether these developments will lead to a breakthrough in the stalemate of Japan-North Korea relations remains an open question.

Conclusion

The perception of North Korea among the Japanese public has undergone a significant transformation—from being relatively favorable in the Cold War era to extremely negative as the result of issues such as abductions, nuclear weapons, and missile tests. In this context, the first-ever Japan-North Korea summit, held in 2002, succeeded in repatriating five abductees. Despite North Korea's long-standing claim that the abduction issue was a "fabrication by the Japanese government," Japan continued to believe in the possibility of resolving this issue. The return of these abductees was the result of Japan's persistent efforts to find a solution. Forcing Kim Jong-il, known for his tough stance, to apologize was a rare diplomatic victory for contemporary Japan. The Japan-North Korea Pyongyang Declaration, the only document signed by the leaders of both countries, has

since become the foundation of Japan's policy toward North Korea.

Since this breakthrough, however, Japan-North Korea relations have proceeded on a downward spiral. Now, North Korea appears to have determined that it doesn't need to appeal to Japan for economic cooperation. Rather, by advancing negotiations with the United States and achieving an easing of sanctions, it believes it can secure support not only from China but also from South Korea. In comparison to the period immediately following what is referred to as the "Arduous March" in the late 1990s—a time of unprecedented famine—North Korea's domestic economy has relatively stabilized, while Japan's economic power has relatively declined.

Nonetheless, this does not mean that North Korea can afford to continue to ignore Japan entirely. Even if Japan lacks the capacity to advance negotiations with North Korea on its own, the Japanese Prime Minister can still send messages to the US President that may serve as a brake on the progress of US-North Korea relations. If North Korea is considering the resumption of negotiations with the United States, a certain degree of improvement in Japan-North Korea relations is also likely necessary. In this sense, Japan holds a hidden card in its hands.

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