

NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR ISSUE AND JAPAN

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In the period since North Korea conducted first nuclear test on October 9, 2006, international diplomacy focusing on the Korean Peninsula has undergone a major shift. During the last two years of Bush administration, the Korean Peninsula has started along a course involving efforts to achieve a negotiated deal. In the midst of all this, Japan, frustrated in its attempts to resolve the abduction issue, has simply cast aside its earlier policy of engagement and set off down a track different from the one that the rest of Northeast Asia was following. As a result, Japan's significance as a player in the region was clearly on the decline.

Worse yet, Japan might face the very real danger of eventually being branded by the international community as a country that reaps the benefits of multilateral diplomacy but does not shoulder the costs. If Japan refuses to deal with North Korea owing to the lack of progress on the abduction issue and declines to bear any of the costs of the agreement, it will appear to be a free rider in the eyes of the international community.

The current situation is not "good" for North Korea, but then, the North Koreans have never known a good situation. There is no golden age for them. We fool ourselves into forgetting that the leadership in Pyongyang is inured to bad odds, untrustworthy allies, and adverse trend lines. Things have been worse—much worse—for Pyongyang in the

past, and the regime has survived. The result is that North Korea has endured even if, in the long run, our observations are accurate that the regime is bankrupt; the North Korean economy is in ruins.

We are 15 years into nuclear negotiations with North Korea. By now it should be clear that certain things “work,” and others don’t. Every time we have had reason to suppose that Pyongyang should be off balance and that the situation was finally turning to our advantage, we have been wrong. We can never squeeze the Koreans hard enough, find a corner small enough, or move our leverage into position quickly enough to get them to give us what we think we must have.

We may not be clear about the lessons of our years of engagement with North Korea. The North Koreans, however, have no doubts about what they learned from the abrupt swing in US policy that occurred in the transition from the Clinton to the Bush administrations. To them, the lesson was unmistakable: Whatever any administration may sign and promise, North Korea will always be at the mercy of US presidential politics and therefore cannot afford to bet the whole of its security on improved relations with the United States.

From North Korea’s perspective, the same problem exists with Japan and the ROK. We have to convince Pyongyang otherwise, but it will not be easy. That is the work of many years, conducted on several fronts, requiring enormous patience and persistence. We had better get on with it, because the North is not going to disappear and the problems that flow from its anomalous existence will not lessen as long as we keep hitting our heads against the same old wall.

What should Japan do? Tokyo should shift course and resume a policy of engagement. Moreover, in shifting to a policy of engagement, it must be prepared to cut a deal with Pyongyang. The task of doing business with the North Koreans will doubtless be distasteful to many Japanese, the more so given Pyongyang's lack of candor vis-à-vis the abduction issue. However, where the nuclear issue is concerned, Japan has an international responsibility to overcome its distaste and work to reach an accommodation with North Korea.

The idea is not to sever the abduction issue from the nuclear issue and reward North Korea with aid even in the absence of any progress on the former. Rather, we should adopt a stance of actively seeking a comprehensive settlement of both issues, accepting our share of the costs of agreements coming out of the six-party talks. If we want a diplomatic solution to our issues with North Korea, we need to deal with Pyongyang.

Japan has at its disposal an effective means for making maximum use of the two incentives of diplomatic normalization and post-normalization economic aid to push Pyongyang toward policy change, and that is to insist that North Korea faithfully implement the Japan–North Korea Pyongyang Declaration issued when Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi made his historic visit to North Korea in 2002.

However, this will obviously involve a change in Japan's hard-line, single-minded focus on the abduction issue and a willingness to work seriously not only to resolve such security concerns as North Korea's nuclear program and missile launches, but also to settle the historical accounts between Japan and North Korea relating to their "unfortunate past" (referring mainly to the period in the twentieth century when Japan annexed the Korean Peninsula). What is required, in fact, is a comprehensive resolution of all outstanding issues.

Where the Japanese government can display real initiative is in relation to the problem of North Korea's ballistic missiles. To reach a resolution, however, Japan will have to tackle the issue aggressively. At present practically no other country has evinced deep concern over North Korea's medium- and long-range ballistic missiles. But Japan, whose entire territory lies within the range of North Korea's Nodong missiles, can scarcely afford to stand by idly. Getting Pyongyang to scrap all its ballistic missiles with a range of 500 kilometers or more should be a key item on Japan's security agenda. This would amount to a quantum leap for Japanese security, since without ballistic missiles the North would have no means of attacking Japan directly, even if it were to miniaturize its nuclear weapons and increase their number.

From this standpoint it is vital that Tokyo pressure Pyongyang to relinquish its ballistic missiles even as it calls on the North to scrap all its nuclear weapons. The best approach would be for Japan and the United States to join in negotiating with North Korea on this issue. A separate forum on the missile issue could be set up within the framework of the six-party talks. Launching three-party talks among Tokyo, Washington, and Pyongyang on missile reduction should be regarded as an urgent task.

Japan can also play an active role in building a "peace regime" for the Korean Peninsula and a security mechanism for Northeast Asia. There are two aspects to the creation of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. One is to put a formal end to the state of war that still exists under the Korean War armistice agreement. However, the truth is that peace has essentially prevailed under this regime for more than 50 years. Accordingly, bringing the Korean War to a formal end involves nothing more than putting an official stamp on the state of peace that has already persisted for half a century.

The important task is the second one, that of building a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. To accomplish this, it is essential to first resolve the antagonism

between Japan and North Korea, because it is fair to assume that the North will not relinquish its weapons of mass destruction until such a reconciliation is achieved. And there is no way to build a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula while the North possesses both nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles.

Until Tokyo and Pyongyang normalize relations or at least resolve the current state of conflict, a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula will be no more than a pipe dream. For this very reason Japan must contribute proactively to the process. Japan still has an opportunity to demonstrate leadership in the resolution of the North Korean problem.