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Recovering a Lost Opportunity: Japan-North Korea Negotiations in the Wake of the Iraqi War

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The September 17, 2002 agreement between Japan and North Korea opened the way to resolution of the longstanding conflict that is central to tensions on the Korean peninsula, in Japan-Korea relations, and throughout Northeast Asia. Those prospects were quickly overwhelmed by the combination of new conflicts over North Korea's nuclear program and the NK announcement concerning the abductions and deaths of Japanese citizens. Analyzing the manipulation of the abduction issue by those seeking to sabotage the negotiations, Wada suggests bases for a resumption of a path toward two power, as well as six power, reconciliation in Northeast Asia. The author is a leading specialist on the Korean War and Japan-Korean Relations. This article appeared in the May 2003 issue of Sekai.

The Japanese government pledged support for the U.S. cause once fighting broke out in Iraq. This support is tied to the present North Korean crisis: Japan finds itself increasingly dependent on the United States military as the crisis deepens. This sent a message to North Korea that Japan believes an Iraq-type outcome to be in its national interest. This fear psychologically corners the North Koreans who are already apprehensive over the U.S. war in Iraq. On the other hand, neither the Japanese nor the South Korean people can approve of the tragedy in Iraq being repeated in Northeast Asia, and must work together to prevent the North Korean crisis from advancing to such a catastrophic state. Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi's visit with North Korean Secretary General Kim Jong Il presented a momentous opportunity to ward off such a disaster; this chance has, however, subsequently been squandered.

On September 17, 2002 the two leaders met in the North Korean capital and signed the Japan-Korea Pyongyang Declaration. This agreement pledged to resolve historical problems and pending issues, including the abducted Japanese issue, between the two peoples. The two sides also confirmed their willingness to observe nuclear-related agreements and agreed to "exert all efforts to establish diplomatic ties at an early date." Normalization of Japan-North Korea relations, they stated, would empower their countries to work together to ensure the "peace and security of the Northeast Asia region." Resolving the crisis conditions that North Korea presently faced, moreover, would help "construct a cooperative relationship based on mutual trust" with other countries of the region. Koizumi and Kim pledged to "construct the framework needed to strengthen regional trust."

We Japanese rejoiced in the breakthrough that this agreement represented, and anticipated the resolution of outstanding issues, Japan-North Korea normalization, and an enhanced peace in the region. However, while the five surviving abductees were repatriated to Japan, Japan-North Korea negotiations have stagnated. Moreover, the North Korean nuclear crisis entered a new phase following the October news of its enriched uranium program, and Japan-North Korea relations have become even stormier than those that Kim and Koizumi faced when they met in Pyongyang. To stave off the tragic darkness of an Iraq War in our region, it is critical that we rejuvenate the potential that this meeting produced. This requires reviewing the events that transpired over this period to understand how we lost this opportunity.

1 The Japan-North Korea Summit

The team assembled to prepare for this summit included Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichiro, Chief Cabinet Secretary Fukuda Yasuo, and Deputy Secretary Furukawa Teijiro. In addition, the Foreign Ministry contributed the efforts of Minister Kawaguchi Yoriko, Vice-Minister Takeuchi Yukio, Director General Tanaka Hitoshi of the Asian and Oceanic Affairs Bureau, and Hiramatsu Kenji of the Northeast Asia Bureau. Secret preparations began from the fall of 2001 when Tanaka and Hiramatsu met with North Korean defense committee members and people close to Kim Jong Il.

Tanaka made public the upshot of these secret negotiations with North Korea at a press conference that followed talks in Pyongyang on August 25, 2002. It had been agreed that the two leaders would strive to achieve normalization at the earliest possible date, settling once and for all the issues of the abducted Japanese, the nuclear program, and colonial period issues (*Asahi shinbun*, August 27, 2002).

The March 2002 confession of Yao Megumi that her husband, a Red Army member residing in North Korea, had participated in the kidnapping of Japanese nationals, drew attention to the abducted Japanese issue while these secret meetings were proceeding. Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Abe Shinzo, who had been kept uninformed of the secret meetings with North Korea, repeatedly criticized the weak-kneed policies of the Foreign Ministry's Asian Bureau. The Diet Members Union for the Rapid Rescue of Japanese Kidnapped by North Korea (DUR, headed first by Ishiba Shigeru and then by Nakayama Shoichi, with Koike Yuriko as vice-president, Nishimura Shingo chief secretary and Hirasawa Katsuei general secretary) demanded that the Japanese government impose economic sanctions against North Korea. Two other groups, the National Association for the Rescue of Japanese Kidnapped by North Korea (NAR, headed by Sato Katsumi) and the Association of Families of Victims Kidnapped by North Korea (AFV) echoed the call for sanctions. They depicted the Kim Jong Il regime as unprecedented in its human rights violations, thus revealing their position that it was fruitless to expect that "tenacious discussion" would result in the kidnapped victims' rescue. These views were in direct opposition to comprehensive settlement proposals that the government had advanced at the secret meetings.

The Japan-North Korea summit took place and the two sides signed the Pyongyang Declaration. The revelation of the kidnappings was shocking but the Japanese people demonstrated their support for Koizumi. A survey conducted by the *Yomiuri shinbun* on September 18-19 revealed that 81.2 per cent supported his participation in the summit. His cabinet's approval rating also rose dramatically.

2 Initial Reaction to the News of Japanese Abductees in North Korea

The families of the abducted Japanese received information of the North Korean admission of the kidnappings and the deaths of eight abductees with great shock. NAR questioned the accuracy of the information. "There is no basis for the information on the survival or death of the abductees that the North Korean government provided to Koizumi during his visit. The Japanese government has yet to verify the accuracy of this information. Thus, there is a strong possibility that the eight people who are reported as dead may still be alive. Despite this, the Japanese government's simply informing the families that these people are dead may increase the possibility that these victims, if indeed alive, will be killed." It is a very human reaction for family members to reject such information and to retain hope that their relatives are still alive. However, as a formal declaration it is a wild assertion. It is a thoughtless declaration that paints the North Korean government as a bunch of liars. On September 20, however, NAR and AFV sent an open letter to Tanaka Hitoshi, blaming him for "informing the victims' families of Pyongyang's unverified information as fact."

Japanese periodicals critical of the Japan-North Korea summit from this time launched personal attacks on Tanaka Hitoshi. The October 3 issue of *Shukan bunshun*, in a special report on "Class A Criminals, responsible for the regretful summit," revealed the "lies of Foreign Ministry official Tanaka." Hirasawa Katsuei, secretary general of the DUR, wrote in the November *Shokun* on "The recklessness of traitor bureaucrat Tanaka of the Foreign Ministry."

The Foreign Ministry felt that the best follow-up to the summit would be to allow the victims' families to travel to Pyongyang to meet with the surviving abductees (*Asahi shinbun* September 21). Tanaka and Hiramatsu proposed this to the North Koreans at a working-level meeting held in Beijing on September 21-22 (*Asahi shinbun* September 23). The suggestion, however, was blocked in Japan. On September 24 the Japanese government decided to dispatch an investigative team to North Korea prior to allowing the families to travel there. It further designated Abe Shinzo to manage the abducted Japanese issue, thus separating Tanaka and Fukuda from direction of Japan-North Korea negotiations. Abe succeeded in squashing the idea of establishing within the Foreign Ministry a family support center. Instead, the government instituted this support window as a Cabinet Secretariat and appointed former Ambassador to Uzbekistan, Nakayama Kyoko, to head it (*Mainichi shinbun*, September 25).

Meeting with Prime Minister Koizumi on September 27, AFV leaders expressed distrust in Tanaka and support for Abe. They also demanded that surviving abductees and their children be allowed to return to Japan within a month. Koizumi assured his visitors that "normalization cannot be considered without resolution of the abducted Japanese issue, and that the entire Japanese government will exert utmost efforts toward resolving the issue." The next day a government investigative team headed by Saiki Akita, Deputy Director-General of the Foreign Ministry's Asian and Oceanic Affairs Bureau, left for North Korea. It returned on October 2 after conducting exhaustive investigations and negotiations. Aside from the shocking news of Yokota Megumi's death by suicide, the information provided by the North Koreans was incomplete.

The U.S. government expressed serious misgivings regarding the Japan-North Korea summit. President George W. Bush endorsed the meeting during a September 12 conference with Koizumi, at the same time conveying to Koizumi his strong concern over North Korea's uranium enrichment program. The Japanese prime minister moved to implement the Pyongyang Declaration despite this disagreement. While U.S. Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly accused North Korea of developing its nuclear program during October 3-5 talks in Pyongyang, Koizumi's government on October 4 decided to reopen negotiations with North Korea at the end of the month in Kuala Lumpur.

Anger over the abducted Japanese intensified among the Japanese people and in the media. Prior to September 17, substantial proof of kidnapping existed only in the case of Hara Tadaaki through testimony by Shin Guang Ju, a North Korean agent who was caught in South Korea with Haras passport in 1980. In addition, there had been several eyewitness accounts regarding the cases of Kume Yutaka and Arimoto Keiko given by those who had traveled to North Korea. The circumstances of other suspected abductees were based on hearsay, such as that provided by North Korean refugees. Kim Jong Il's admission and apology for thirteen cases, however, turned these suspicions into "kidnapping cases." Long fed a stream of dubious news, the people and media exploded in surprise and anger after receiving indisputable reports that North Koreans had been kidnapping Japanese citizens. This reaction was to be expected.

NAR and AFV criticized the North Korean government over the slipshod investigation reports it had provided. DUR directly voiced its opposition to the Japanese government plan to reopen diplomatic negotiations with the North Koreans under these conditions. On October 7 the *Asahi shinbun* reported survey results showing 44 per cent in favor and 43 per cent opposed to the Japanese government returning to negotiations. Prime Minister Koizumi, fearing a strong public backlash, retreated from his original position of working toward a quick realization of diplomatic ties with North Korea.

The mass media targeted the "pro-North Korean faction" which it defined as any Japanese who either did not demonstrate sufficient passion for the abductions or who worked to improve Japan-North Korea relations. Ishii Hideo of the *Sankei shinbun* helped initiate this attack in an article appearing in the November 2002 issue of *Bungei shunju* titled "Pro-North Korean intellectuals and their record of unreflective and reckless remarks." Among those cited were Nonaka Hiromu, Nakayama Masaaki, Yoshida Yasuhiko, and Wada Haruki (myself), along with the *Asahi shinbun* and the Japan Socialist Party. This smear forced a halt to all activity of the Diet Members Union for Japan-North Korea Friendship headed by Nakayama and Nonaka.

3 Abductees as Political Pawns

Under these circumstances the Foreign Ministry informed the North Korean government that Japan would delay reopening negotiations until after the surviving abductees were granted a "temporary return" to Japan, a demand that the North Korean government accepted. On October 9 they agreed to reopen diplomatic talks on October 29-30; the surviving abductees would be permitted to "temporarily return" to Japan for one to two weeks from October 15.

NAR and AFV greeted the news with surprise. On October 16, Sato Katsumi, Chairman of NAR wrote in the *Yomiuri shinbun*: "It was a truly unbelievable scene to witness the five surviving kidnapped victims disembark at Haneda Airport even though Kim Jung Il remains in power." They hurried to formulate a new strategy to respond to the positive and unexpected North Korean steps. On October 13 AFV drew up its position as follows: 1) If the five abductees do indeed return to Japan they must not be sent back to North Korea; 2) AFV will continue to base its activities on the premise that the eight victims reported by North Korea to be dead may still be alive; 3) AFV demands that the government dispatch another investigative mission; 4) AFV will not go to North Korea; and 5) AFV will continue our activities until all abducted Japanese victims are returned (Hirasawa's column in *Mainichi shinbun* October 31). Furthermore, AFVs Nishioka began moves to draw up an agreement with the media, the first step in control by means of representative information gathering system that was to continue long after this.

The five surviving abductees returned to Japan on October 15 for the first time in twenty-five years. The scenes of aged parents and relatives who greeted them brought tears to all. From the time they set foot on Japanese soil the media subjected the returnees and their families to intense scrutiny. Their return was at first announced as a "temporary" one that would return the abductees to North Korea after one or two weeks. On October 16, news of the North Korean enriched uranium project became public. This issue greatly obstructed Japan-North Korea negotiations. On October 18, Hirasawa Katsuei responded to Ambassador Suzuki Katsunari's declaration that it would constitute a breach of promise if Japan did not return the abductees by asking whether "he was ready to take responsibility for their never again being permitted to return to Japan." Abe voiced the government's position that, at a minimum, they not be returned before October 29, when negotiations between Japan and North Korea were slated to begin.

The question of the abductees' return to North Korea was addressed on October 22 at Liberal Democratic Party headquarters where a meeting convened with Abe, Nakagawa (chairman of the DUR), Hirasawa, Sato, and Araki Kazuhiro (secretary general of the NAR) in attendance. Hirasawa wrote in his "Nagatacho nikki" column that "it was decided that AFV representatives would meet with Ambassador Suzuki." It appears that those in attendance confirmed their feeling that the five should not be returned to North Korea. He continued: "Abe's true feelings even before they were repatriated was that it was best not to return them." I felt the same way. Abe remarked, you should refrain from expressing this view prior to their return so as not to give the North Koreans a reason to prevent their travel to Japan."

AFV on October 23 conveyed its view that the Japanese government should not return the five abductees to North Korea. On that day Pak Ryong Yun, Vice Director of the North Korean Foreign Ministry Asia Bureau, stated in an interview with the *Asahi shinbun* and Fuji television that if they so desired, the five should be allowed to extend their stay in Japan. The following day Hasuie Kaoru, one of the 5 victim-survivors now in Japan, informed Nakayama by telephone that he and his wife wished to remain in Japan. Deputy Foreign Minister Yano reported on this day that the Japanese government was negotiating extensions to their stay. The DUR announced support for Yano's statement and submitted a written petition demanding that the abductees never be returned to North Korea. Prompted by these NGO organizations, Abe took the position on behalf of the government that the five victims would not be allowed to go back to North Korea, thus reneging on the promise that it had made to the North Korean government. In breaking this promise the Japanese government conveyed the message that it did not believe the promises of its North Korean counterpart.

It was around this time that the Kim Hegyong issue exploded. Kim reportedly was the daughter of Yokota Megumi, one of the abductees listed as deceased. Her existence threatened to undermine claims that the North Korean government's report on these eight victims was fraudulent. NAR thus at first treated Kim Hegyong as a fabrication. However, on October 24 DNA results biologically tied her to Yokota's parents. Megumi's father, Yokota Shigeru, expressed a strong desire to meet his grandchild, even if it meant traveling to North Korea to do so. On October 25, Fuji television broadcast an interview conducted with Kim Hegyong in which she expressed a desire to see her grandparents. She hoped that they would be able to travel to Pyongyang as it was not possible for her to visit Japan. Nishioka, responding to the moving appeal that Kim's grandfather presented that same day on Fuji television, visited the Yokota residence to convince the man to change his attitude. He apparently succeeded as Yokota appeared the next day alongside representatives of the two associations at a news conference to convey his change of attitude. NARs Sato declared that his association henceforth would block any approach by Fuji TV to gather material.

4 Japan-North Korea Impasse

A statement released on October 25 by a spokesman for the North Korean Foreign Ministry displayed a positive attitude toward new initiatives. "Dramatic changes have taken place in the situation on the Korean Peninsula and the rest of Northeast Asia in the new century. Inter-Korean relations and DPRK relations with Russia, China, and Japan have entered an important new phase and bold measures have been taken to reconnect inter-Korean railroads which have remained cut for over half a century, settle the past with Japan, and generally do away with leftover issues of the last century. The DPRK has taken a series of steps to reenergize the economy, including the establishment of a special economic region. These developments will contribute to peace in Asia and the rest of the world." He added, "we have especially done away with our enemy relationship with the United States. We anticipated settling outstanding issues with the United States on an equal footing. It was against this backdrop that the DPRK recently received a special envoy from the United States president." Thus, in addition to strengthening inter-Korea and Japan-North Korea relations, the DPRK also anticipated improving its relations with the United States.

The North Koreans considered US special envoy James Kelly's insistence on centering the content of the discussions on nuclear development to have been rude. The United States, while vowing to refrain from use of nuclear weapons against North Korea, had violated the 1994 agreement by depicting North Korea as a target for preemptive nuclear attack. "We made it clear that the DPRK was entitled to possess not only nuclear weapons but any other type of weapon more powerful than those so as to defend its sovereignty and right of existence." The report concluded by explaining that "if the US legally assures the DPRK of nonaggression, including the nonuse of nuclear weapons against it by concluding such a treaty, the DPRK would be prepared to put aside its security concerns." This was plainly at odds with reports coming from special ambassador Kelly.

Japan-North Korea negotiations resumed on October 29 in Kuala Lumpur. The Japanese government dispatched Suzuki Katsunari, Saiki Akita and Hiramatsu Kenji; the North Korean delegation included Jong Tae Hwa and Pak Ryong Yun. Entering the venue with blue ribbons, signs of protest against the North Korean kidnapping draped across their chests, the Japanese delegation demanded to know when the children of the victims would be allowed to visit Japan, and insisted on answers being provided for the 100 points of concern that the Japanese government had raised over the North Korean governments report. The DPRK delegation in return demanded that the five abductees be returned to North Korea, adding that it would not consider issues concerning the offspring of Japanese abductees while they remained in Japan. The North Koreans then demanded negotiation on economic cooperation. The meetings ended on October 30 with none of these issues resolved. The Japanese delegation showed little interest in a North Korean suggestion for continuation of discussions at the end of November, simply replying that they would consider it. The two sides agreed to meet in the middle of the month to discuss security issues.

On October 30 NAR and AFV issued a joint statement that Japan could "wait until the North Koreans can no longer endure. We also demand that the government enact economic sanctions and appeal to the United Nations Human Rights Commission. We plan to cooperate with sympathizers on this issue in the Diet to promote positive measures in step with Japan's allies." On this same day a spokesman for the North Korean Red Cross complained, "ten days have passed and the five have not returned. Why," they asked, "is Japan breaking faith by violating points to which it already agreed?" He expressed astonishment at such infantile behavior. We see in this declaration that the cooperative attitude had still not been broken.

On November 5 a North Korean Foreign Ministry spokesman criticized Japan's refusal to discuss other issues before the North Korean nuclear program and abducted Japanese problems were resolved. He pointed out that resolving issues such as diplomatic normalization and economic cooperation first could open roads for solving other pending problems. He also warned that North Korea could reconsider its moratorium on missile launchings. Clearly North Korea had also hardened its view and returned to its past mood.

5 The Kim Jong Il Connection

In reviewing this progression of events it is clear that NAR and AFV succeeded in blocking progress in Japan-North Korea relations. NAR chairman Sato Katsumi (also director of the Gendai Koria [Contemporary Korea] Research Center), and Nishioka Tsutomu, professor at Tokyo Christian University and chief editor of the journal *Gendai Koria*, published three books on the abductions in late November and early December. Nishioka authored *Terrorist State: Let's not be Fooled by North Korea* and *The "Japan Plot" Initiated by Kim Jong Il: The Facts Behind the Kidnapping*. Sato's book, *Families of Abducted Japanese: Tracing Their Struggle with Kim Jong Il*, concluded by calling for the "overthrow of the Kim Jong Il regime." He wrote, "NAR continues its efforts to return all the abductees to Japan. Many blame the abductee issue for the current impasse in Japan-North Korea negotiations. However, solutions to this problem will be complicated as long as Kim Jong Il remains in power. The collapse of his regime is thus absolutely necessary."

In his keynote address at the organization's special meeting on November 24, Sato explained: "Politics and diplomacy are operations that work to bring North Korea's military totalitarian regime to a collapse from within. If we coordinate political and diplomatic pressure with domestic action, and if we expose its inner contradictions so that the Kim Jong Il regime crumbles, we will resolve both the abducted Japanese and the military threat issues at one stroke. Since we know this, the only question is whether we have the courage to carry out such steps (applause). I earnestly hope that we can rely on our government to do this, but if it does not do so, we should take steps to make our government move on security issues in the same way we have made it move on the abduction issue, and thereby regain our security and our pride, in accordance with the opinions of you all." (Gendai Koria, October 2002) Kojima Harumi remarked that "his lecture serves as a fundamental guide for the movement." In addressing the view that NAR was "using the abducted Japanese issue to topple the Kim Jong Il regime," a view he attributed to Wada Haruki writing in a Korean paper, he remarked that the "continuation of the Kim Jong Il regime and the solution to the abducted Japanese problem are incompatible. This is because it is Kim Jong Il who is responsible for the kidnappings. The purpose of this action was terrorism ordered by Kim. Consequently, our battle is against this regime."

Sato Katsumi, appearing before the National Diet at a Lower House Security Committee hearing on December 10, concluded that, "this regime is one with which the Japanese cannot negotiate; it must be quickly overthrown." In response to a question about how to accomplish this, Sato explained that the North Korean regime would not last three months if Japan were to shut off the flow of "people, money, materials, and information" transported to the DPRK by ships such as the Mangyongbong. On the abductees, Sato explained, "there are close to 100 people who have been abducted by the North Koreans. They must be returned to Japan." He added that it was "fantasy" to anticipate the Kim regime subjecting those responsible for these crimes to criminal punishment and damage compensation.

This is how NAR thinks. It is a movement that has been built on mobilizing the families of the victims. From around December 2002, Japanese TV stations launched a scathing anti-North Korean campaign. It might be a result of NARs work which is dedicated to attacking the Pyongyang Declaration and declaring that the Kim Jong Il regime must go. These efforts succeeded in crushing any potential to rejuvenate the improved relations achieved during Koizumi's visit to Pyongyang.

6 A Future for Japan-North Korea Negotiations?

The question now turns to the future, namely how best to proceed. The cause of the recent breakdown in negotiations was the demand for a timetable to allow children of Japanese abductees to visit Japan. Abe remarked, "Japan has heavy oil and food. We are in no hurry. We can wait for North Korea to give in." However, North Korea did not bend and Abe's diplomacy failed. Both NAR and AFV, with support from US officials, demanded that the Japanese Foreign Ministry initiate economic sanctions if the North Koreans did not respond by April 15, six months after the Pyongyang summit. Should it fail to comply, they threatened to paint the ministry as an "enemy" that was "idle, shiftless, and incapable." This is not a course that the Japanese government or the Japanese people can take; it is not one that will bring resolution to the abducted Japanese issue.

Japan's only option is to resurrect the Pyongyang Declaration by agreeing to the unconditional reopening of Japan-North Korea bilateral negotiations. At this point, even if the North Korean authorities tell the children to travel to Japan, they are bound to say they want to stay in North Korea. The only way forward is to create an atmosphere in which they can say they want to go to Japan. Likewise, receiving answers to questions regarding the incomplete information on the eight Japanese presumed dead requires cross-examination. Thus, Japan must agree to hold unconditional negotiations with North Korea in order to comprehensively resolve the concerns of both states.

Japan's connection to the most immediate issue, North Korea's nuclear program, lies in the economic assistance that it can provide. It must inform the North Korean government in no uncertain terms that no assistance will be forthcoming if it refuses to relinquish its nuclear development program. While some say that Japan can act as a mediator between North Korea and the United States, a more productive role would be for it to negotiate a three-party consensus with North and South Korea to refrain from producing nuclear weapons. Then it must work toward gaining United States, Russian and Chinese approval of a treaty that secures their promise to refrain from using these weapons in the region. This would provide the basis for a six-nation pact pledging support for a peaceful non-nuclear Northeast Asian region. We who have witnessed the tragedy of the war in Iraq must prevent the United States from going to war in Korea to change the North Korean regime.