The Politics of North Korea in Japan

Rust M. Deming

Introduction

More than sixty years after the end of World War II, Japan has still not normalized relations the Democratic Republic of Korea (DPRK), better known as North Korea, even though the GOJ concluded a Treaty with the Republic of Korea (ROK) in 1965 that provided the basis for the establishment of full diplomatic relations. The lack of formal relations with the regime in Pyongyang represents one of the two major Japanese foreign policy issues remaining from WWII, the other being the conclusion of a peace treaty with Russia.

This paper examines the background of this issue; the efforts made by Japan over the years to normalize relations with the North, and current impasse over the abduction, nuclear, and missile issues. The paper also discusses the current strains between Washington and Tokyo over approaches to North Korea. I will conclude with some thoughts about the future evolution of Japan-North Korean relations.

The Political Setting in Japan

Since 1945, the Korean issue has created a deep divide in Japanese politics along Cold War lines. At the end of the War there were about 700,000 Korean residents in Japan. They were largely made up of individuals who were brought over, voluntarily or involuntarily, during Japan’s 35 year control of the peninsula to perform labor in some of most difficult and hazardous occupations, including coal mining. After Japan’s defeat, many Koreans remained in Japan. Those that remained became polarized between support for Kim IL Sung’s “Socialist Paradise” in the North or Sigman Rhea’s authoritarian regime in the South. This polarization was paralleled in Japanese politics, with the Left supporting the DPRK and the conservative establishment supporting the ROK.

The Korean War that began in June 1950 deepened this divide, with the Left in Japan accepting Pyongyang’s claim that the ROK, backed by the US, began the conflict. The ruling Conservative coalition government, still under American/Allied occupation, was weary of being dragged into the conflict by
the US, but the sympathies of the GOJ were clearly with the anti-communist ROK. Japan was forced to send minesweepers, with Japanese crews, to the conflict, but otherwise avoided direct involvement. At the same time, Japanese firms benefited greatly from American procurement for the war, and the Korean War “boom” is widely credited as the first major step in Japan’s economic recovery from WW II.

It was not only post-war developments on the peninsula that divided the Japanese body-politic on Korea. The Left and the Right in Japan had a very different view of Japan’s forty year colonial rule of Korea. The Japanese Left regarded Japan’s 40-year occupation of Korea as an example of Japanese imperialism and exploitation, while many in Japan’s conservative establishment defended, privately and sometimes publicly, the colonial period as leaving a largely positive legacy of economic development and education.

This Left/Right divide extended to the Korean residents of Japan, which were, as noted above, split along North/South lines. Supporters of the North were organized in Chosen Soren and originally included about 2/3s of the 700,000 member Korean community. Chosen Soren generally followed directions from Pyongyang and organized schools and social/welfare networks for its members. In addition, Chosen Soren became the primary channel for the transfer of funds to the DPRK, much of which were derived from the “pachinko” parlors run by Korean residents. Chosen Soren even operated a weekly ferry from Niigata to Wonsan which became the primary means for the transfer of people, goods, and funds between Japan and the DPRK until the GOJ suspended its operation in July 2006 as a sanction for North Korean missile tests. Chosen Soren also supported the 1959-1984 repatriation to the DPRK of about 87,000 Korean residents, along with some 6000 Japanese spouses.

Supporters of the ROK were organized in Mindan, which originally included about 1/3 of Korean Community. Mindan was less structured than Chosen Soren, and its membership tended to be less political and more integrated into Japanese society. The almost universal membership of Japan’s Korean community in one of these two organizations demonstrated both the strong nationalistic identification of Koreans and the discrimination and barriers to assimilation that existed in Japan.
Japan’s Delayed Normalization with the ROK

ROK-Japan relations were not normalized until 1965, reflecting the complex history between Japan and Korea. For the first seven years after the War, Japan was under Allied occupation, and when it regained its sovereignty in 1952, the Korean War was still raging. After the 1953 Armistice, the US encouraged the GOJ to establish ties with the ROK, but the Left in Japan was opposed to Japanese recognition of the “puppet” regime in the South rather than the “legitimate” regime in Pyongyang. Moreover, the first ROK President, Syngman Rhee (1948-1960), was extremely suspicious of Japan and was not interested in normalizing relations on terms Japan might accept.

When Japan did normalize relations in 1965, the settlement contained the following elements:
- A Treaty which contained an expression of Japan’s “deep remorse” for the suffering caused the Korean people during the colonial period;
- Recognition by Japan of the ROK as the “only lawful government” on the Korean peninsula, an expression borrowed from an earlier UN resolution. This reflected ROK desires to block subsequent Japan-DPRK normalization;
- An agreement on claims/reparations. The GOJ took the position that since Japan and Korea were not at war, no reparations were owed, but the GOJ did renounce all claims to Japanese property in the ROK and provided a $1.5 billion “aid package.”
- A fisheries agreement designed to end the frequent disputes in contiguous waters;
- Legal residency in Japan for all Koreans who were there in 1945 and their children.

Japan-North Korea Ties fail to move forward

The Japan Socialist party (JSP) had opposed Japan’s normalization with the ROK. After Tokyo established ties with Seoul in 1965, the JSP immediately pushed for the GOJ to take parallel steps with the DPRK. There were also those within the LDP and bureaucracy who wanted Japan to pursue relations with the North which were then limited to private fisheries and trade arrangements negotiated by the JSP and the North. Many in the Japanese establishment saw normalization with the North as broadening Japan’s diplomatic horizon’s by balancing Japan’s ties with Seoul, removing a source
of domestic political tension, an opening potentially lucrative trade and investment opportunities. It is important to bear in mind that in 1965 the economies of the North and South were approximately equal in output, and during the period of Japanese colonial rule, the North had been the center of Korean industrialization. Therefore, Japanese expectations of economic benefits to be derived from relations with North Korea were not unreasonable.

However, Japan’s interest in North Korea steadily waned. While the economy of the ROK took off in the late 1960s and into the 1970s, North Korea stagnated so the economic incentives for Japanese engagement diminished. Furthermore, the ROK and the US discouraged Japan from opening relations with the North, and with other issues higher on the GOJ’s foreign policy agenda, including the return of Okinawa and normalization with Beijing, the GOJ saw little point in wasting diplomatic capital on the DPRK. The North’s increasingly “rogue state” behavior added to the disincentives. In 1968, North Korea launched a commando raid against Seoul’s “Blue House,” In 1970 the DPRK gave sanctuary to the Japan Red Army hijackers of the “Yodo” airliner. By the late 1970s, Japanese authorities suspected Pyongyang of abducting Japanese citizens, and in the 1980s North Korea carried out terrorist attacks in Rangoon and against a Korean Airlines passenger jet.

During this period, there were informal relations between Tokyo and Pyongyang, largely managed by emissaries from the Japan Socialist Party (JSP). Through this channel Japan and North Korea negotiated private trade and fisheries agreements, and there were government level contacts in third countries, but the GOJ made no serious effort to establish diplomatic relations with the North.

Post Cold War Openings

It was not until the Cold war was approaching its end in the later 1980s that Japan made overtures to open a formal dialogue with the DPRK. Tokyo was in effect given license by Seoul in the form of President Roh Tae Woo initiatives toward the North in 1988 which led to the 1991 ROK-DPRK agreements on reconciliation and denuclearization and ROK normalization with Moscow (1990) and Beijing (1992), as well as ROK/DPRK UN memberships (1991).

In 1990, LDP heavyweight Shin Kanemaru led a multi-party delegation to Pyongyang for a preliminary talk on the terms of normalization. Kanemaru,
while a master at internal LDP deal making, was not an experienced international negotiator. He and his team allowed the North Koreans to persuade them that Japan owed compensation not only for the thirty-five year colonial period but also for the post-war division of the Korean peninsula. The GOJ immediately repudiated this concession, and Kanemaru apologized for his gaffe when he returned home, but it became part of the DPRK position for at least the next twenty years.

Despite this fiasco, the agreement reached between the Kanemaru delegation and the North Koreans did set out the basic issues to be negotiated:

1) A treaty to settle issues of the past
2) “Reparations” in the form of an aid package
3) Endorsement of the ROK-DPRK 1991 agreements on reconciliation and denuclearization
4) Discussion of “humanitarian issues,” a codeword for the abduction issue and the rights of Korean residents of Japan.

Eight rounds of negotiations took place over the next few years, but they produced very little progress, primarily because of disagreement over amount/terms of compensation.

The North Korean Nuclear and Missile Programs enter the Equation

In the 1990’s relations between Japan and North Korea fluctuated widely. In 1993-94, the first nuclear crisis chilled ties. The DPRK expelled the IAEA inspectors and began reprocessing spent fuel, provoking a strong reaction from Washington, including movement toward imposing sanctions and reinforcing American forces in the ROK. Former President Carter’s visit to Pyongyang and the subsequent negotiations of the Agreed Framework in October 1994 defused the crisis.

In negotiating the Agreed Framework with the DPRK, the American negotiators agreed to replace the North’s existing graphite moderated Soviet reactors, ideal for making weapons-grade plutonium, with Light Water reactors that are much more proliferation-resistant. Without prior consultation with either Seoul or Tokyo, the U.S turned to the ROK and Japan to fund the estimated $4 billion cost of the two reactors.
After overcoming its anger at the presumptuousness of the US, Japan agreed to take on its $1 billion share of the project and became a founding member of the Korean Energy Development Organization (KEDO) which oversaw the construction. Japan also joined others in the international community in providing food aid to the North to relieve a severe famine caused by drought and agricultural mismanagement. This in turn put Tokyo back in touch with Pyongyang and helped revitalize their bilateral dialogue. In this more positive atmosphere, Japan resumed its normalization discussions with the DPRK, and the North agreed to the return of some of the Japanese spouses of Korean residents who had earlier been repatriated to the North.

After this brief thaw, Japan-DPRK relations took a sharp downturn in the 1997-2000 periods. The abduction issue took on new political prominence as the families of the abductees became organized and petitioned the government for a much more aggressive policy toward the North. Equally significant was the 1998 launch by North Korea of a long range Taepodong missile over Japan. This launch sent a shock wave through Japan and led to a significant hardening of attitudes toward North Korea across the political spectrum. Even long-time supporters on the Left backed away from DPRK, and support within the Korean community for the DPRK weakened.

The Koizumi Breakthrough

Junichiro Koizumi became Prime Minister of Japan in April of 2001, bringing a new style of top-down leadership and a desire to undertake new initiatives in both the domestic and foreign policy arenas. One area he sought a breakthrough was in Japan-North Korean relations. Through secret back channel negotiations with North Korean diplomats in Beijing, he arranged to visit Pyongyang in Sept. 2002. Because of concerns that the Bush administration, which was taking a very hard line approach to the North, would try to dissuade the GOJ, the negotiations with Pyongyang were kept from Washington until just before the trip was announced.

Koizumi appears to have had several motives for the visit. According to a former Japanese diplomat, the North, having been shunned by the Bush administration, was making overtures to Japan, and Koizumi saw the opportunity for an historic breakthrough that would settle the abduction issue and pave the way for normalization. This in turn would give Japan greater diplomatic leverage, particularly since China and Russia had established relations with Seoul a decade earlier. At the same time, if Koizumi resolved
the abduction issue and settled one of the last issues from WW II, he would establish his legacy in Japanese politics.

In the event, the visit produced mixed results. North Korea admitted to having carried out 13 abductions and said eight had since died. The list included one individual who was not on GOJ’s list of suspected abductees. Kim Chong Il apologized to Koizumi and promised to allow the five survivors to return to Japan for visits, but the explanations offered by the North Korean side did not satisfy the GOJ or the Japanese public. Indeed the North Korean revelations produced a backlash in Japan as what had only been suspicions became confirmed fact.

Koizumi’s visit did produce some positive results in other areas. On the nuclear and missile issues, the North reconfirmed its commitment to the Agreed Framework and to its moratorium on further long range missile tests. With respect to the terms for normalization of relations, Pyongyang agreed to accept the 1995 “Murayama Statement” (the statement by the former Japanese Prime Minister of the “deep remorse and heartfelt apology” for the “damage and suffering” caused by “Japan’s aggression and colonial rule”) as the basis of Japan’s apology for the colonial period and to accept the “ROK Formula” as the basis of financial compensation (e.g. aid in place of “reparations” and no reference to the Postwar period.)

After Koizumi’s return to Japan, the abduction issue continued to overshadow the relationship with North Korea. The five surviving abductees were allowed to visit Japan, but when the GOJ decided to allow them to remain, the DPRK accused Japan of breaking the agreement. Koizumi decided to make a second visit to Pyongyang in 2004 to obtain DPRK agreement to allow family members of the returned abductees to join their relatives in Japan. The North did agree to let the family members leave and promised further investigation of the abductions. Later in 2004, North Korea handed over to the GOJ what it purported to be the ashes of Megumi Yokota, one of the abductees, but Japanese DNA analysis cast doubt on the authenticity of the remains, further inflaming Japanese public opinion. So-called “Comprehensive Talks” in 2006 failed to advance the Japan-DPRK agenda, and the North declared that it not pursues further investigations of the abductions.
Japan’s Response to a Nuclear North Korea

On July 4 and 5, 2006, Pyongyang ended its moratorium on long range missile tests by conducting two Taepodong 2 launches, along with a series of tests of shorter range missiles. Japan, then serving as president the UN Security Council, orchestrated a strong and unanimous UNSC statement of condemnation of the DPRK actions. Tokyo, on its own, went further by banning port calls by the weekly ferry linking Niigata in Japan and Wonson in the North, the only regular direct link between Japan and the DPRK. The cutoff of this service also removed a major channel for remittances from Korean residents in Japan to their relatives in the North.

In early October 2006, North Korea conducted a nuclear explosion. Tokyo’s reaction was strong but measured. The GOJ again played lead role at UNSC on resolutions condemning DPRK. Japan went further on its won by banning all North Korean ships from Japanese ports and all DPRK imports. The elevation of Shinzo Abe to Prime Minister in late September 2006 further hardened GOJ policy toward the DPRK, inasmuch as Abe had largely risen to the position on the basis of the popular support he received for championing the abduction issues when he was in Koizumi’s Cabinet.

The Gap between the US and Japan on North Korea

Before the North Korean nuclear tests, Tokyo and Washington had been the hardliners in the Six Party Talks. While Koizumi had initially been uneasy about the Bush administration’s refusal to engage directly with North, which contrasted sharply with Koizumi’s own decision to visit Pyongyang twice, the GOJ was pleased with Washington’s “no nonsense” approach on the missile and nuclear issues. In addition, President Bush received wide spread praise in the Japanese media for personally embracing the abduction issue by meeting with family members when a delegation visited Washington.

Tokyo was clearly caught off guard by the shift in US policy toward North Korea after the nuclear test and the American mid-term elections in November 2006. This shift was the result of a combination of factors, including USG recognition that the policy of “non-engagement” had not worked and that the nuclear test had upped the ante. At the same, the departure from the Administration of hard-liners such as Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and UN Ambassador John Bolton facilitated a change of policy. Secretary of State Rice received the President’s support for allowing Assistant
Secretary Chris Hill to meet directly with the North Koreans to see if the Six Party process could be revived.

When Chris Hill met privately with his North Korean counterpart in Berlin in January 2007, the reaction of Tokyo was one of concern. Nevertheless, when Six Party talks resumed in Beijing the next month, the GOJ joined the negotiations and went along with the Feb. 13, 2007 “Beijing Six Party Denuclearization Action Plan” that resulted. This “Action Plan” implemented the Sept. 2005 Six Party Agreement. Five parallel actions were agreed on:

- The DPRK would shut down its nuclear facilities at Yongbyon and invite back the IAEA inspectors it had earlier expelled;
- The DPRK would produce a list all its nuclear programs, including the amount of separated Plutonium that it possessed;
- The US-DPRK normalization talks would resume, and the US would begin the process of removing the designation of the DPRK as a state-sponsor of terrorism and terminating the application of the Trading with the Enemy Act, the two major impediments to economic relations.
- Japan and the DPRK would resume normalization talks to resolve the “unfortunate past” and “outstanding issues of concern;”
- The DPRK would be supplied with emergency energy assistance, including heavy fuel oil, with 50,000 tons to be delivered in 60 days (The GOJ said it could not participate in these early deliveries because of domestic political sensitivities related to the abduction issue).

The “Action Plan” established five Working Groups on:
- Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula;
- Normalization of DPRK-US ties;
- Normalization of DPRK-Japan ties;
- Economy and Energy Cooperation;
- Northeast Asia Peace and Security Mechanism

The document stipulated that “in principle, progress in one WG shall not affect progress in other WGs,” which meant in practice that agreement on denuclearization and removal of North Korea from the US terrorism list would not be held hostage to lack of progress in the Japan-DPRK discussions, including on the abduction issue. In the Oct. 3, 2007 Six Party statement on “Second Phase Actions” which spelled out a timetable for North Korea’s nuclear declaration and disablement of its nuclear facilities, the US reaffirmed its intent to remove DPRK from terrorism list when
Pyongyang provided a satisfactory accounting of its nuclear program and completed the disablement of its reactor, reprocessing, fuel fabrication facilities at Yongbang.

The GOJ was very unhappy with USG de-linkage of the abduction issue from the removal of DPRK from US list of state sponsors of terrorism. In the Japanese press and in private comments by Japanese politicians, the US action was described as a “betrayal” that undercuts GOJ leverage with the North on the abduction issue. At the same time, many American officials were unhappy with what they consider the GOJ’s “parochial” perspective, arguing that the denuclearization of the DPRK was the highest priority not just for the US, but also for Japan, the region, and the world. Americans also note that since the US has virtually no connections with North Korea, delisting is one of the few carrots Washington has to offer in return for substantial North Korean steps toward the elimination of its nuclear program.

When Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda succeeded Abe in September 2007, he appeared to signal that he was looking for ways to de-link the nuclear and abduction issues, but he has had little room to maneuver because of his low popularity ratings and his preoccupation with other issues.

**Recent Developments**

As is the norm with respect to negotiations with North Korea, deadlines have not been met, and at several points it appeared the talks were on the brink of failure. In April 2008, Chris Hill met with his North Korean counterparts in Singapore to seek the promised North Korean full declaration of all its nuclear programs, including clarification of the uranium enrichment issue and alleged DPRK assistance to a nuclear program in Syria. As of early June 2008, these discussions were continuing in Beijing and appeared to be making progress. The US and Japan have been consulting closely, and Washington has repeatedly voiced understanding of Japan’s concerns on the abduction issue, but it does not appear that the fundamental gap between US and Japan has been closed.

How to handle the abduction issue is not the only potential difference between Washington and Tokyo on the nuclear talks with the DPRK. There may be differing end-game priorities. For the US, while there is probably no internally agreed position on a bottom-line, its does appear that for many USG officials and experts, preventing North Korea from transferring nuclear
material and technology to third countries or non-state actors may be the highest priority. This is not a speculative concern given the DPRK’s track record, including its history of terrorist activity. Equally important for the US is the “irreversible” dismantlement of North Korea’s nuclear reactors and reprocessing facilities and the fullest possible accounting and removal of plutonium and spent fuel. The US also seeks a full explanation of the uranium enrichment program and the links to Syria, but neither of these programs appears to have reached a critical stage.

For Japan, the abduction issue continues to have the highest political priority. With respect to North Korea’s nuclear program, the GOJ fully shares the US priority on the dismantlement of the DPRK’s reactors and reprocessing facilities and the full accounting and removal of all plutonium. Japan, however, attaches equal importance to curbing North Korea’s long range missile program which poses a direct threat to the country. The issues of North Korea’s enrichment program and its ties with Syria appear less central to GOJ concerns. There is therefore the potential for differing US and GOJ bottom lines when and if negotiations with the DPRK reach the end game.

**Conclusion - Whither Japan and North Korea?**

The normalization of relations between Japan and North Korea is an essential element in the long-term stability of Northeast Asia. From a strategic perspective, the establishment of full relations between Pyongyang and Tokyo would remove a lingering source of tension in the region and resolve one of the last issues remaining issues from World War II. In addition, Japan’s compensation to North Korea, in the form of economic assistance, could be a key element in the North’s economic development and perhaps later political evolution. Resolution of the nuclear issue is a necessary part of this equation, but it may not be sufficient given the other obstacles to normalization.

The first of these obstacles is of course the abduction issue which is proving to be extremely difficult to resolve. Japan is demanding that North Korea:

- Return all living victims to Japan;
- Provide a full accounting of all victims;
- Hand over those DPRK officials responsible for the abductions.

The DPRK may be unable or unwilling to comply with any or all of
these demands. The abduction issue is clearly among the most sensitive and embarrassing aspects of North Korean behavior, and there are rumors that both the current leader, Kim Chong-Il and his father, Kim Il-Sung, were involved. Some Japanese North Korean experts have speculated that it may be more difficult for Pyongyang to “come clean” about the abduction program than to “fess up” to all its nuclear activities. The North Koreans are also in the difficult position of having to prove to the satisfaction of the GOJ that it has fully investigated the abductions and released all the information it has discovered.

A further barrier to normalization is the hardening of Japanese public opinion toward the regime in Pyongyang and the uncompromising attitude taken by many in the LDP, including former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and future PM contender Taro Aso. The fact that former Prime Minister Koizumi made two trips to Pyongyang without fully resolving the abduction issue serves as a major disincentive for further such overtures to Pyongyang unless results are assured.

More broadly, the pro-DPRK lobby in Japan, represented most prominently by Chosen Soren and the Japan Socialist Party, has greatly atrophied in the wake of end of the Cold War, the rise of the ROK, and the North’s abductions and the missile and nuclear tests. In turn there is reduced tolerance of North Korean polemics. A further barrier to normalization is the lack of the informal, back channel “pipes” between Japan and North Korea that used to exist in the form of a cadre of JSP and LDP politicians who maintained ties with their counterparts in the DPRK. Today there are only a handful of Japanese political figures, most notably Taku Yamazaki of the LDP, who can serve as a conduit for informal proposals to resolve issues. It is important that these channels be reinvigorated.

There is also a lack of economic incentives on the Japanese sides to normalize with North Korean. Forty years ago, as noted earlier, North Korea was on a par with the ROK in terms of per capita income. Now the gap is seven or eight to one. In addition, the DPRK has not learned the lessons of other Socialist/Marist economies that the market has to be allowed to operate, as China and Vietnam have. Therefore there are few Japanese businessmen pushing to get access to the North Korean market.

On the government side, Japan is suffering from one of the most severe accumulated budget deficits among the industrialized countries, and ODA (foreign aid) is under increasing pressure. The Japanese public recognizes that
normalization with North Korea will, by historic necessity, involve a major outlay of national treasure, and the national mood is not very supportive.

On the North Korean side, as well, there are problems. The DPRK appears to be giving little priority to Japan, fixated instead upon relations with the US. Since Koizumi’s visits to North Korea, Pyongyang has giving little apparent priority to ties with Tokyo, and some Japanese believe that Pyongyang is convinced that isolating Tokyo is the best strategy because they believe that if the US moves toward the DPRK, Japan will inevitably follow.

What are the elements of a deal that will lead to normalization? Clearly there needs to be a broadly accepted resolution of the nuclear problem. If the North Korean nuclear program is eliminated in a manner acceptable to the US, ROK, China and Japan, this will provide a positive framework in which Japan-DPRK relations should move forward. If the Six Party talks fail, it is hard to envision how Japan and North Korea could move toward a normal relationship.

A nuclear deal by itself is unlikely to be sufficient to create the political support in Japan necessary for normalization. It will also be essential for North Korea to extend indefinitely its moratorium on long range missile tests, if not abandon altogether its Taepodong program. On the abductees, the DPRK will at least need to offer further information on the fate of the victims, and the GOJ is likely to have to drop its demand that the North turn over those responsible. Most fundamentally, there needs to be the political will on both sides to overcome the obstacles and make it happen. In mid June of 2008, the GOJ and DPRK held renewed discussions, and there were signs of progress so hopefully both governments will continue this forward movement.

Beyond its leadership role in moving Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear program, the US can play a helpful role by continuing to raise the abduction issue with the DPRK, even if it moves ahead with removing the DPRK from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism. However, in the final analysis, it will be up to Tokyo and Pyongyang to come to terms.