

Japan-North Korea Relations from an American Perspective

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Thank you, Professor Ito, for your kind introduction. It is a pleasure to be back here at JFIR, with whom IFPA had an excellent experience of collaboration for a recently completed project on U.S.-Japan-Korea diplomatic and crisis management cooperation.

I am here in Tokyo for two weeks, conducting research for a short-term project on Japan-North Korea relations and what their status means for U.S. policy makers now, and into the near future. I have been talking with Diet members, Foreign Ministry and Defense Agency officials, scholars, journalists, activists, taxi drivers...just about everyone I can find to try to understand how policy is made in this area, why, and what is its likely course in the future, given various developments.

It is hard to sum up the results of my findings (so far) in just a few words, so I am glad that you have given me almost thirty minutes to talk about this issue. As you well know, the situation is complex, involving important elements of national security, global security, regional geopolitics, domestic politics, personal tragedy, and human suffering. My overall impression is that the situation is not as bad as I thought – that is, despite the importance of the abduction issue, it is not quite the obstacle to progress that many in the United States (and here) make it out to be. It is still extremely serious, of course, and it largely prevents proactive Japanese diplomatic movement, but it does not appear to be as intractable as, say, the Northern Territories issue.

But I am getting ahead of myself here, and as I said, the situation is more complicated than that. To start, let me take a few minutes to talk about an American experience that might help us think about the issue in some different ways. It's a story that offers some hope, I believe, but it also highlights to me the challenges that we face when dealing with North Korea. I am talking about the experience of U.S.-Vietnam normalization.

Carter Administration (1977-1981)

Following his campaign pledge of normalizing relations with Vietnam and “putting the war behind us,” President Jimmy Carter sent Leonard Woodcock, president of the United Auto Workers Union, to Hanoi in March 1977. The United States agreed to support Vietnam's membership in the UN, and suggested establishment of diplomatic relations after which the United States would lift its trade embargo and grant Vietnam access to international financial institution (IFI) loans. The United States also made it clear that progress in bilateral relations was based on the assumption of Vietnam's efforts for the

“fullest possible accounting of MIAs [soldiers missing in action],” knowing that MIAs would be a key obstacle to progress in normalization.

Vietnam, however, responded that it would neither cooperate on MIAs nor agree to diplomatic normalization until the United States pledged to provide economic assistance, which was promised in President Nixon’s letter to North Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Van Dong in February 1973.¹ The United States rejected this demand for economic aid by saying that the 1973 Paris Agreement, which provided the basis for Nixon’s letter, had been nullified by North Vietnamese violations in 1974-75. Although Woodcock denied the notion of humanitarian aid as a precondition for accounting of MIAs, Deputy Foreign Minister Phan Hien said, “They are separate issues but closely interrelated.”

Following the Woodcock mission, the two countries’ representatives met three times in Paris in 1977. Subsequently, in mid-1978, the Vietnamese dropped the demand for economic assistance, and made additional gestures toward normalization. But, Washington’s normalization efforts with the People’s Republic of China (PRC), combined with a series of hostile Vietnamese actions in 1978, foreclosed the normalization opportunity. During this period, Vietnam expelled its citizens of Chinese origin (Hoa people), which caused a refugee crisis in Southeast Asia; prepared to invade Cambodia; and expanded its ties with the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, policy makers in Washington (National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzeninski in particular) reasoned that negotiations with Hanoi could jeopardize Washington’s efforts to establish diplomatic relations with Beijing.

On October 1, 1978, President Carter decided to defer normalization talks with Vietnam following Brzeninski’s advice. Hanoi subsequently moved closer to the Soviet Union, signing a mutual security treaty with Moscow. Talks between Hanoi and Washington completely broke down with Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia in late December, which was followed by China’s retaliation in February 1979. In many ways, Cold War politics, rather than domestic factors, was a chief impediment to U.S.-Vietnam normalization during the Carter administration.

Reagan Administration (1981-1989)

The Reagan administration affirmed “a complete and verified withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia” as a precondition for normalization with Vietnam, a position amplified in 1985 to the Vietnamese and including withdrawal “in the context of a comprehensive political settlement in Cambodia.”² Moreover, the “pace and scope of normalization” depended on Vietnam’s cooperation in resolving MIA and other humanitarian issues.³

¹ In the letter, President Nixon promised to “contribute to postwar reconstruction in North Vietnam without any political conditions ... in the range of \$3.25 billion in grant aid over five years.”

² Frederick Z. Brown, “The United States and Vietnam: Road to Normalization,” in *Honey and Vinegar*, ed. Richard N. Haas and Meghan L. O’Sullivan (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institutional Press, 2000), 147.

³ *Ibid.*

In 1985, new signs of interest in normalization came out of Vietnam, when it allowed a U.S. team to excavate a B-52 crash site near Hanoi. Hanoi announced that it would make an effort to resolve the MIA issues within two years, and returned the remains of about one hundred MIAs between 1985 and 1987. Recognizing some positive moves on the part of Vietnam, President Reagan sent General John Vessey, a special envoy on MIAs, to Hanoi in August 1987, and later the United States agreed to encourage charitable assistance for Vietnam, though it fell short of Vietnam's requests for economic assistance. Nevertheless, it was the first time that the United States provided anything as part of a deal over MIAs, marking General Vessey's Hanoi mission as an important step toward eventual normalization.

This limited, but meaningful progress in the MIA dialogues could be partly attributed to the Vietnamese leadership's new thinking on foreign policy since the mid-1980s. Vietnam's Sixth National Party Congress in December 1986 adopted *doi moi*, "the renovation of Vietnam's economic system, and to some extent its political system."⁴ Such new ideas led the Vietnamese leadership to concentrate more on economic development while expanding its links with the West, particularly with the United States.

At the same time, however, it was during the Reagan administration that the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia became a prominent civilian force in U.S. domestic politics. The league not only charged the U.S. administration with betraying the POW/MIA families, but it opposed any relaxation of the embargo or normalization until Vietnam provided the fullest possible accounting for the missing and repatriated all recoverable remains.

Bush Administration (1989-1993)

In April 1991, the Bush administration prepared a "road map" for normalization with Vietnam. The road map included "a quid pro quo procedure whereby Vietnam knew what was expected of it and what benefits would accrue as reciprocal steps in the normalization process were taken."⁵ Meanwhile, Vietnam completed its withdrawal from Cambodia in 1989 and signed the UN-sponsored Cambodia peace accords in 1991, satisfying the U.S. demands regarding Cambodia. It also agreed to host a U.S. office in Hanoi to investigate POW/MIA issues. Again, recognizing some progress, the Bush administration provided \$1 million in humanitarian aid (mainly in the form of prosthetics) to Vietnam, and it lifted travel restrictions on Vietnamese diplomats stationed in New York.

The Bush administration, however, maintained its position that Hanoi's cooperation on POW/MIA issues was not enough to satisfy the requirements of the first phases of the road map. Beginning in 1992, Vietnam improved its cooperation on the POW/MIA matters. It allowed U.S. investigators access to Vietnamese wartime military reports, archival information, and "live sighting" reports including unrestricted helicopter access in search of POW/MIAs. The disintegration of the Soviet Union, the largest patron of Vietnam during the Cold War, left Hanoi with few options. In return for Vietnam's better

⁴ Kent Bolton, "Domestic Sources of Vietnam's Foreign Policy," in *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition*, ed. Carlyle A. Thayer and Ramses Amer (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 172.

⁵ Brown, 147.

cooperation, the United States provided \$3 million of humanitarian aid; agreed to restore telecommunications with Vietnam; and pledged grant aid for Vietnamese flood victims. In particular, the United States partially lifted economic embargo on Vietnam in December 1992 by easing some restrictions on U.S. companies' business in Vietnam.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Senate Select Committee on POW/MIAs, chaired by Senator John Kerry (Democrat) and vice-chaired by Senator Bob Smith (Republican), conducted the most extensive investigation on the POW/MIA issues from August 1991 to December 1992. In its final report in January 1993, the committee concluded that "there was 'no compelling evidence' that POWs were alive after the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, and that although there was no "conspiracy" in Washington to cover up live POWs, the U.S. government had seriously neglected and mismanaged the issue, particularly in the 1970s."⁶ The Bush administration expected that the committee's televised hearings, together with better Vietnamese cooperation, would defuse domestic squabbles surrounding the POW/MIA issues, which it did, but only slightly.

Nevertheless, it was during this period that the National League of Families' influence began to diminish as pressure to normalize increased from the U.S. business community. As the second most populous country in Southeast Asia, Vietnam was seen as one of the last untapped potential markets in the region. Furthermore, after the resolution of the Cambodia problem in 1991, ASEAN, Japan, and European nations expanded their commercial relations with Vietnam without facing much U.S. competition, because of the remaining U.S. embargo.

Clinton Administration (1993-2001)

President Bill Clinton came to the presidency after President Bush had paved the way for normalization with Vietnam. On July 2, 1993, President Clinton announced that the United States would no longer oppose IFI loans to Vietnam, though he maintained the economic embargo as Washington's last tool of leverage when negotiating with Hanoi for greater access to sensitive documents and for the resolution of about one hundred so-called discrepancy cases.⁷ Eliminating the IFI veto without lifting the embargo, however, put U.S. companies in a more disadvantageous position, as foreign companies seized the initiative in World Bank-funded infrastructure projects in Vietnam. American firms, including Boeing, Caterpillar, and major oil companies, intensified their lobbying for lifting the economic embargo, while the league supported by veteran groups continued to oppose any openings to Vietnam without more progress on POW/MIAs.

On January 27, 1994, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution for lifting the embargo, and it was signed into law in April. On February 3, President Clinton ordered an end to the U.S. trade embargo on Vietnam. Later in February, the United States and Vietnam established liaison offices in Washington and Hanoi. And then, on July 11, President Clinton officially announced the normalization of diplomatic relations with Vietnam. During his

⁶ Mark E. Manyin, "The Vietnam-U.S. Normalization Process," CRS Issue Brief for Congress, June 17, 2005, 3.

⁷ Discrepancy (or last-known-alive priority) cases are cases where the United States knows that an American serviceman was alive when he was on the ground but cannot determine what happened to him since.

official announcement, President Clinton emphasized the United States' unflagging efforts on behalf of POW/MIAs. He said:

Never before in the history of warfare has such an extensive effort been made to resolve the fate of soldiers who did not return. Let me emphasize, normalization of our relations with Vietnam is not the end of our effort. Our strategy is working. Normalization of relations is the next appropriate step. With this new relationship, we will be able to make more progress.⁸

On the same day, Winston Lord, assistant secretary of state for East Asian affairs, also stressed that there was still much to be done for POW/MIAs, and diplomatic normalization would be the best way for further progress on these issues.

Now let's see how this compares to the Japan-North Korea situation. Some of the similarities are obvious and striking: the past history, the "interrelation" of different strategic, political, and humanitarian issues, the role of domestic lobbies, the lack of trust, and even the strong belief at one point that some citizens were still alive in the other country. But before I suggest that the history of U.S.-Vietnam normalization is somehow a useful guide for Japan and North Korea, let me highlight some profound differences. First, Vietnam was (is) not governed by a communist monarchy in the same sense that North Korea is ruled by the Kim family. Vietnam's adoption of *doi moi* in 1986 represented a key strategic and political decision made by a government with far more legitimacy than the Kim Jong-il regime has. Perhaps North Korea will get there, but it is not there yet, and we don't know if it is closer to the Vietnam of 1979 or of 1985.

Second, though the comparison of Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia to the nuclear issue, and the POW/MIAs to Japanese abductees has some validity, the fact is that North Korea's nuclear programs pose a much wider and more significant threat to the region and the world. And the United States was not threatened by Vietnamese missiles.

Moreover, the abduction issue is not the moral equivalent of the POW/MIAs, who were taken or lost during wartime and not in the context of the glaring and ongoing human rights violations that are occurring in North Korea today. It's worth remembering, however, that at the time (particularly the mid-1980s) the Vietnamese were often demonized in the United States for currently violating the prisoners' rights (some of whom were thought to be still alive, as portrayed in such popular movies as *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) and *Missing in Action* (1984)). And the influence of the POW/MIA interest groups was quite strong and emotional, much as that of the abductee interest groups in Japan. To this day, for example, most public buildings in the United States (federal and local) fly a black POW/MIA flag alongside the American flag.

What I take from this experience is a couple of things. First, the fact that this is a long and drawn-out process is not surprising. It took the United States about twenty years to normalize relations with Vietnam, and the circumstances were arguably much easier to

⁸ The White House, "Remarks by the President on Announcement of Normalization of Diplomatic Relations with Vietnam," July 11, 1995.

deal with. If we say that Japan-North Korea normalization only began in earnest in 1990 or 1991, then we could be a decade or two away from resolution, even with a *doi moi*-type of decision in Pyongyang.

Second, an incremental process can be effective, and all issues do not need to be strictly linked to each other. Save a big carrot for the end, but be prepared to give some up along the way. Even though Vietnam had not completed its withdrawal from Cambodia until 1989 or signed the peace accords until 1991, for example, it was still working with the United States on locating and returning remains, and the United States was making some minor (though noticeable) concessions.

Third, it will be necessary to validate politically (by some authoritative group in Japan with a role similar to that of the U.S. Senate Select Committee) that there are no current, unknown cases of abductees still living in North Korea. I'm not sure that this is even true at this point, but it will be necessary someday, and North Korean cooperation is required. This authoritative validation is necessary to bound the problem and to limit its open-ended nature.

Fourth, there will need to be some voice in Japan (similar to the business community in the United States during normalization with Vietnam) that can make a public case that there are broader national interests at stake beyond the abductee issue. It probably won't be the business community in this case, but it could be a national security lobby that points out the wider benefits to Japan of greater calm and stability in Northeast Asia.

Part of this case that needs to be made is the point that the process of developing more bilateral ties and multi-party involvement in North Korea is potentially the most effective means to satisfy the needs of the affected families regarding information about the fate of their loved ones. Another part of the case to be made is a more specific acknowledgement (for provision of context) that South Korea has also suffered abductions at the hands of North Korea, and more widely that Japan also inflicted suffering in the past against the North, and that in some ways the only difference between the two (North Korean transgressions against Japanese and Japanese transgressions against North Koreans) was a matter of decades. Again, this is only possible once the issue has been substantially contained in the sense that no new abduction cases are suspected or anticipated.

Finally, Japan will need to create a process whereby the humanitarian issues can be effectively separated from the other issues of denuclearization and normalization. This is not to say that Japan would normalize relations before the satisfactory resolution of the abduction issue, but it would allow discussions on both issues to move forward without being directly linked to each other. In a way, the United States had to do this with China when it granted permanent normal trade relations with China in the 1990s, by creating a panel of politicians and experts to continue monitoring and lobbying for human rights in China, while at the same time allowing other aspects of the relationship to move forward. In this sense, the recent trend toward internationalization of North Korea's human rights performance is a potentially useful and altogether appropriate step, though it needs to

engage Europe, Australia, the UN, and South Korea more directly and at least win the acquiescence of China and Russia.

Now let's look at Japan's situation as it stands and consider its options vis-à-vis North Korea, the United States, and the six-party process. With regard to the nuclear issue, I see no near-term prospects for progress in this area (unless something unexpected happens). The threat to Japan's and America's national security is real, but it is not acute enough to prompt a more drastic approach (either in terms of buying out the program or agreeing to live with a limited program, or alternatively, introducing American medium-range missiles in Japan to pressure South Korea and China to do something). What is not clear to me is how long America and Japan can tolerate the status quo (or a version thereof). There are many valid reasons to move more aggressively against North Korea (or instead, to target China and raise the cost to Beijing for subsidizing Kim Jong-il), but the fact is that neither the United States nor Japan wants to spark a major confrontation, and there is some benefit to certain groups in Japan (and in the United States) to have a smoldering North Korean threat nearby.

The following actions in Japan have all been inspired and made politically viable by the North Korean threat: faster combat ships, the launching of an intelligence satellite; revising the U.S.-Japan Defense Guidelines and enhancing interoperability in areas surrounding Japan; the ballistic missile defense program; the Special Measures law (Yuji-Hosei); participation in the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI); and the pondering of developing some pre-emptive strike capability (including missiles), as well as certain aspects of constitutional revision. Without the North Korean threat, Japan would probably not be operating in the Indian Ocean or in Iraq, as it is today.

The fact that the defense and security community in Japan is not a more central player in the policy making process vis-à-vis North Korea suggests to me that the threat perception is not yet that strong. I have heard from some that Japan could endure another year or two of the current situation, but five or six years is another story. How do Japan and the United States determine when more drastic measures are necessary? As North Korea's nuclear development continues unchecked, the need for good intelligence about its programs will increase over time, so this is something we need to think about and plan for together.

There seems little doubt that the political right wing in Japan has found in the abduction issue and Kim Jong-il its most marketable issue in terms of fundraising and political support. I sense that the abduction issue is waning as a barrier to action, but it is still a deterrent...almost like a flimsy fence confining a bull in a field. There must be something significant to draw or push the bull through the fence to the other side, otherwise he is content to stay where he is. If the only way for dealing with Kim is face-to-face, then Koizumi is in a difficult position without some progress on the nuclear issue or the abduction issue, and perhaps this is the objective of current negotiations (to create enough political space for a breakthrough). This puts Japan in a passive position vis-à-vis North Korea, dependent on events and the actions of others. Alternatively, some increase in the threat perception (a missile launch or a nuclear test) could force the issue in the opposite direction.

There are some actions on the margins that can be taken. In exchange for some minor economic support (or a pledge to forgive some KEDO debts), North Korea could allow more family members of abductees to go to Japan (in particular, Megumi Yokota's daughter, who might (or might not) continue to state that her mother did, indeed, die in North Korea). North Korea could launch another, more intense, investigation about the issue, and maybe send back to Japan the Yodo hijackers or Red Army members for prosecution. Some progress on this front, combined with the internationalization and institutionalization of the North Korean human rights issue, could help to de-link abductions from the nuclear issue.

I think that, deep down, the United States would prefer such a de-linkage, since it makes it easier for Washington to argue for de-linkage on its part (both in terms of pursuing human rights and religious freedom in North Korea and to punish criminal activities). U.S. officials have stood by Japan on the abduction issue in the six-party talks, but this is out of respect for Japan, not because they believe it is an effective negotiating strategy.

Alternatively, in the absence of any progress, incremental pressure could be applied, mostly through various forms of economic sanctions. But even small adjustments in this area, either in terms of offering compensation for progress on the abduction issue or applying certain sanctions, should be carefully considered in bilateral discussions (as well as domestically). Our policies need not be identical, as in fact a slight difference in approach can provide room for compromise (as apparently happened during the most recent round of talks when Japan facilitated a North Korean-U.S. conversation about the Macau Bank sanctions).

Some in Japan have pointed out to me that Japan (and perhaps the United States) loses a certain amount of leverage when our policies are the same. But if there is to be some chaos in our policies, it should be contrived chaos, not real. In this sense, I was encouraged to learn that Victor Cha of the NSC had a substantive meeting with Abe Shinzo recently, and I think the communication between Saiki and DeTrani, and between the Asian Affairs Bureau at MOFA with the U.S. Embassy here, has been pretty good. But this communication might need to be more institutionalized and occur at a higher level. Richard Armitage is sorely missed in this case (though the Burns-Nishida meetings have been productive), and the Hill-Sasae relationship is not as strong as was the Kelly-Yabunaka relationship. However, I might be asking for too much here, since U.S. policy makers do not speak with one voice these days, so a truly strategic approach (let alone a coordinated one) might be too difficult, but it can still be our goal.

Nor am I suggesting that a bilateral set talks replace the TCOG of before. We should not give up on South Korea yet, as many of their positions are completely understandable, and there is a chance that a new administration in 2008 could adopt an ever so slightly more U.S.-Japan friendly approach. Moreover, there is little that we can do, short of taking drastic steps. There is still a role for trilateral coordination, but there might also be a role for a new level of bilateral strategic planning to most effectively calibrate the application of pressure and dialogue vis-à-vis North Korea. In this context, communication between

the White House and the Vice President's office with the Kantei could be particularly important, and an across-the-board, bilateral strategy session like the one that occurred in 2003 might be needed.

In conclusion, I have been encouraged during this trip that the U.S.-Japan diplomatic communication process is working, and though we might misread or overlook some important information from time to time, we seem to understand each other fairly well. But I believe that we are reaching a point where the issue could become much more complicated and involve higher stakes. There are big strategic decisions to make. Will we move in the same direction with the same determination? There are many initiatives to implement (PSI, Illicit Activities Initiative (IAI), defensive measures, etc.). Are we organized properly to carry these out? I think there is still some work to be done in these areas.

But let me stop here and thank you very much for your patience. I look forward to a productive discussion on these and related issues.