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The first agonizing step towards stabilizing Northeast Asia

Sang Jung Kang

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By Kang Sangjung

Translated by Alexis Dudden

History moved forward, but the movement was accompanied by painful sacrifice. Prime Minister Koizumi's visit to North Korea was intended to carve out a new page in the history of Japan and North Korea, countries whose relations have been suspended for almost half a century. Instead, when North Korea revealed the shocking truth that among the Japanese abducted to North Korea 8 were dead and 5 alive somewhere, the response from the Japanese public was of anger against North Korea combined with suspicion that the Koizumi administration was using the North Korean visit to try to boost its own popularity. The Japanese Foreign Ministry, moreover, compounded its incompetence by delaying distribution of a list recording the dates of the victims' deaths. Fierce criticism of the government and its handling of foreign affairs mounts daily. In response to this public concern, the outlook for the normalization talks scheduled for October becomes uncertain, and it is possible that the government's schedule for accelerated negotiations towards normalization might collapse.

Koizumi's visit to North Korea

In response to occurrences such as the Taepodong [North Korean] missile firing off the coast of Japan, the military engagement with unmarked ships (the so-called mystery ships), the crisis with the US over suspected nuclear weapons development, and the North Korean famine brought about by economic collapse, the Japanese view of North Korea has become increasingly severe. When it was revealed that the kidnapped had been victims of virtual state terrorism, the anger of Japanese people, as they shared the sorrow of the families of the kidnapped, threatened to explode. However, we should not allow the deep sorrow and resentment of the present moment to blank out past history and thereby nip in the bud our capacity to imagine the future. Past history means the pain of hundreds of thousands of colonized Koreans who tasted the same bitterness as the families of the kidnap victims. Of course, sufferings of past history must not be traded off in such a way as to justify present injustice. Nor should we forget that the righteous anger that stirs now is not that of the Japanese people alone. If the present sadness and anger can be made to flow in such a way as to help us to understand the harshness of colonialism, then we will realize that the way to make amends to the victims is to attend to the Japan-North Korean relationship, severed now for over half a century.

Image of Taepodong missile launch

To say this is not to absolve North Korea of its crimes. Matters that have to be raised when the negotiations over normalization resume include: clarification of the truth about the abductions, how the deaths occurred, and the circumstances of those still alive, facilitation of family meetings or for the return of the survivors to Japan, punishment of the organs responsible and apology and compensation by the North Korean state. We cannot, however, allow these matters to become an excuse for breaking off the normalization negotiations and turning the clock back again to a hostile Japan-North Korea relationship, because if we did that the entire Northeast Asia region, not just Japan and North Korea, would be plunged into crisis. Put differently, it is fair to say that the current negotiations between Japan and North Korea offer a "last chance" for peace in the region.

In this light, the historical significance of the Japan-North Korea talks becomes clear. To understand why Koizumi's visit to North Korea materialized at this time, and why it was possible to issue the joint Japan-North Korea Declaration, we need to probe the thinking on both sides.

The striking fact concerning the Japan-North Korea meeting is that it was made possible by the exercise of strong leadership by the top leaders of the two countries to reach an early agreement on negotiations leading to diplomatic relations. Compared to the marathon, fourteen year-long negotiations between

Japan and South Korea that began during the Korean War and went through numerous planning sessions before the normalization agreement was reached in 1965, the sudden and decisive quality of the Japan-North Korea summit talks was remarkable. However, Japan-North Korea negotiations, too, have a long history. More than ten years have now elapsed since the Joint Three-Party (Japanese Liberal Democratic Party, Japan Socialist Party and North Korean Workers' Party) Statement calling for early establishment of diplomatic relations issued on the occasion of the visit to North Korea by the Japanese parliamentary delegation led by Kanemaru Shin in September 1990. Even so, once negotiations reopened in February 2000 Japan was able to achieve top-level talks and to clarify the prospect of issuing a joint communiqué within a short period. How did such a lightning change occur?

What made it possible was the switch from party diplomacy between Japan and North Korea to formal diplomatic channels involving the appropriate government agencies representing each state, and the fact that the Prime Minister, representing the Japanese government, and the Chairman of the National Defense Commission, as that country's highest-ranking military figure, were able to agree on a path towards comprehensive settlement of the issues. The person symbolizing this change is First Vice Foreign Minister Kang Sok Ju who sat at Kim Jong Il's side during the negotiations. Tellingly, the Secretary of the Workers' Party, Kim Yong Nam, who served single-handedly as counterpart during the Kanemaru visit, was nowhere to be seen.

Kang Sok Ju has the complete trust of Kim Jong Il, yet he has not always been responsible for North Korea's Japanese affairs. Kang initially made an international name for himself in October 1994 when suspicions over North Korea's nuclear development program were resolved by the US-North Korean agreement. The reason that Kang, who is North Korea's expert on U.S. negotiations came to the fore in top level negotiations with Japan is that these negotiations are the precondition for negotiations with the U.S.

A bold strategic shift was essential for North Korea to break through this barrier and resume talks with the US. In other words, in order to achieve economic recovery with the help of Japanese money following the establishment of diplomatic relations, and to maintain its present regime and security through negotiations with the U.S., North Korea had no alternative to drastic change.

The North Korea whose founding myth is the anti-Japanese guerrilla war led by Marshal Kim Il Sung had to adopt a bridge-burning strategy, a bold defensive tactic in which the leader, as the brain of the socio-political body, himself recognized and apologized for the kidnapping incidents. North Korea's head of state acted on his own initiative in acknowledging that his country was a terrorist state. Moreover, North Korea withdrew its demands for war-related reparations, which it had till then consistently argued was the basis for liquidation of the past with Japan, and adopted the approach of economic cooperation suggested by Japan. These actions amounted to a denial of the history of Kim Il Sung's anti-Japanese campaigns and of the ideology of the nation's founding.

It was the leader, standing at the apex, who announced this great reversal, negating the ideology of the state and the legitimacy of the system. Normally, that would mean the collapse of the system, but since Kim Jong Il signed the joint declaration as Commander in Chief of the Military it must mean that he has their support.

Moreover, at the negotiations, Chairman Kim agreed to an indefinite freeze on missile testing as well as 'strict adherence' to all international nuclear agreements, thereby displaying readiness for maximum concession to the US. The only person who can call for such a great reversal in North Korea is Kim Jong Il, and as long as it is he who speaks the system should survive intact. It is North Korea's last card, and after it there is nothing left in its hand. It means that the strategic change in North Korea this time is genuine. It is a last ditch effort to maintain the system by reform.

Last July, North Korea adopted drastic economic reforms, revising the rationing system and adjusting prices and wages to reflect economic reality. The success of these measures depends on how they affect distribution of goods and on whether foreign investment can be attracted. If they do not work, North Korea will be hit by hyper-inflation and be unable to prevent economic collapse. North Korea, which embarked on these economic reforms to try to cheat death has now crossed the Rubicon. Japanese money is a matter of life or death. In addition, North Korea has begun serious construction work on the Gyeongui rail line connecting North and South, and there is movement to create a special economic zone in Sinuiju, the last stop on the rail line before the Chinese border to the North, creating a system along the lines of Hong Kong's "one country/two systems" policy and thereby opening a window for the introduction of foreign capital.

It is too early to tell whether this rapid series of reforms will bring on substantial change in North Korea's unique, totalitarian, 'our' socialism system, and whether as a result, in the near future, the holy trinity of people, party, and leader, may begin to unravel, or whether they will move toward a Chinese style, socialist market economy by means of gradual reform within the system. What is certain is that North Korea stands at a precipice, forced to make a fateful choice.

Japan constitutes a barrier that must be passed in order to advance towards the main destination, America. If North Korea does not take this step forward, there will be no hope for economic reconstruction and security. And in that case, if the Japan-North Korea normalization talks henceforth do not bear fruit, then it may be that North Korea will have no alternative but either to sit and wait for collapse or to take desperate measures. In either case, there would be unimaginable suffering, far greater than what we are faced with today. This is what I meant earlier by saying that it may be the last chance not only for Japan and North Korea but also for peace and stability in the entire Northeast Asia region. When we look back on this Japan-North Korean summit from the vantage of the future, it may be remembered not only as a moment in the fifty-year fate of the North Korean system but as a historical juncture that determined the peace of Northeast Asia.

If that is the case, what were Japan's reasons for reopening top-level negotiations at this time?

Because of repeated failures of party diplomacy since the Kanemaru visit, the Japanese government unified its channels of negotiation under the Foreign Ministry, relying on quiet and confidential diplomatic channels, in particular on Asia-Pacific Bureau Chief Tanaka Hitoshi. For over a year, they carried out informal negotiations with North Korea in this manner. In particular, the Japanese government must have gained clear if implicit understanding from First Vice Foreign Minister Kang that North Korea would make radical concessions toward "the last chance".

It is not that Japan and North Korea have always been enemies since the formation of the two Korean states in 1948. In 1955 North Korea expressed a desire to normalize relations with Japan, and in the Japan-South Korea treaty in 1965 Japan insisted that issues related to the northern half of the peninsula were not covered, leaving open the possibility of future normalization of relations.

Enmeshed in America's Far East strategy, however, following the Korean War Japan gave priority to containment of the Soviet Union and China, and in the context of the anti-Communist Japan/South Korea/Taiwan nexus centering on the U.S., took no positive steps towards opening diplomatic relations with North Korea. This distorted relationship was based on Cold War structures, but there was an undeniable undercurrent of cold indifference in Japan toward the formerly colonized Korea. This was because decolonization was not accomplished through Japanese agency, but was a product of the historical circumstances of defeat in the war.

Nevertheless, Japan's diplomatic negotiations with North Korea are historically significant in filling in a space left empty in Japanese diplomacy since the war. However, the "defense perimeter" consistently maintained by Japan's foreign policy establishment has been adopted, property claims stemming from the colonial era being renounced by both sides as in the Japan-South Korea treaty and 'economic cooperation' being substituted for 'reparations'. Ever since the three party Joint Declaration of 1990, North Korea, by contrast, consistently demanded reparations based on past Japanese belligerency plus compensation for the 45 years of the post-war era. Consequently, it was difficult to see any prospect of compromise between the two sides. It is as if the Japanese government and foreign policy establishment were just waiting for the negotiating environment to improve by North Korea conceding on the "defense perimeter" issue. As North-South relations remained blocked, and with the Bush administration's "War on Terror" producing a hard-line stance, North Korean isolation deepened, and the circumstances slowly matured for Japan to gain the concessions sought on the "defense perimeter".

Amid the likelihood that, following the increasingly likely US attack on Iraq, the focus would shift to North Korea, with carefully-chosen timing the Japanese

foreign policy establishment announced the plan for the blitzkrieg-like Koizumi visit to North Korea. It meant that the Japanese side saw the prospect of the unresolved problems being resolved on its terms, with North Korean concession on the “defense line”.

Japan-North Korea negotiations may be divided into three major categories:

Concerns over the safety and welfare of Japanese citizens, with particular reference to the abduction issue

Security concerns, with special reference to nuclear and missile development issues

Postwar settlement, including resolution of the issue of Japanese colonial control.

Concerns under category three were resolved by adoption of the “defense line” proposed by the Japanese government. At least since the three party Joint Declaration of 1990, Japanese diplomatic priorities in relation to North Korea seem to have been in the order of 3,2,1.

Paradoxically, however, just as Japan scored a diplomatic victory on the third issue, American concerns over the second were raised, and then suddenly the first issue, the abductees, erupted as the biggest concern. At this point, the Koizumi administration had to concern itself not merely with “diplomacy” but with “domestic politics”, paying attention to fluctuations in public opinion. Whether Japan can reach early agreement in negotiations between the two countries while navigating sensitively between domestic and foreign policy spheres depends essentially on how North Korea responds. However, as this is the last chance for North Korea, it will have to, and is expected to, respond to Koizumi's domestic concerns. Even so, there can be no doubt that the next round of Japan-North Korea talks will be stormy.

There is no doubt that the Japan-North Korea talks are historically significant not simply for the peace and security of Japan and North Korea but for the entire Northeast Asia region. If hardliners in the Bush administration wash their hands of North Korean reform and adopt an alternating hard-soft strategy aiming at regime change, Japan could be faced with major decisions over its relations with North Korea. The outcome will profoundly affect Japan’s security. It seems that a number of factors may have combined to hasten the normalization negotiations, including desire to avoid any catastrophe, to resolve historical concerns on Japan's terms, and to advance specifically Japanese interests in Northeast Asia.

In the future, it is to be expected that, through its security talks with North Korea, Japan will emerge as a leading actor in North-East Asian international relations, with a say in nuclear and missile issues, and making proposals for six-sided regional confidence-building talks involving North Korea, Japan, the US, China and Russia. That may well mark a shift in Japanese diplomacy away from what throughout the postwar period has been sarcastically described as a ‘follow the USA’ line. The Japan-North Korea talks mark a decisive step forward in Japanese diplomacy.

Of course, as mentioned earlier, the government and foreign ministry's scenario may be derailed by domestic considerations. It is also not yet clear whether North Korea will agree to unconditional nuclear inspection, comply strictly with the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and the Korean Anti-Nuclear Development Joint Declaration, and freeze the development, deployment and export of missiles. Above all, it remains unclear whether North Korea will review its conventional military forces, when such a process could lead to its becoming militarily defenseless. But there is no prospect of America-Korea negotiations unless they clear these hurdles. Further, when one recalls that in October 1995 the South Korean National Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution proposed by 106 lawmakers calling for revocation of the Japan-South Korea Normalization Treaty, the method of resolving past issues between Japan and North Korea based on that Japan-South Korea Treaty may contain the seeds of new friction between Japan and the Korean peninsula as a whole.

Whatever the outcome, the Japan-North Korea leadership talks amount to a first step in moving history forward.

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KANG Sangjung is a professor of political science specializing in political thought at Tokyo University. His many books in Japanese include Nationalism, Post-Colonialism, and works on the twentieth century and globalization. *This article was completed shortly after the historic visit to North Korea of Japan’s Prime Minister and prior to the October 16 announcement by U.S. envoy James Kelly that North Korean officials had acknowledged the existence of a nuclear weapons program in violation of the 1994 U.S.-DPRK agreement. It appeared in Ronza, November 2002. Posted at Japan Focus on March 15, 2003.*

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