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History Too Long Denied: Japan's Unresolved Colonial Past and Today's North Korea Problem

[Japanese translation available here]

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The year 2010 will mark the centenary of Japanese colonial rule over the Korean peninsula, but, 64 years after that colonial rule was liquidated, North Korea, Japan's neighbour, remains the one country in the world with which it has no relations. That failure to reconcile and to normalize has had, and continues to have, large consequences. The bitterness and anger that feed on the absence of normality fester and threaten to plunge the region back into war. If Asia is to have a future beyond conflict, the "North Korea problem," meaning that country's unresolved colonial relations with Japan (which is much different from the meaning usually intended by US and Japanese policy makers, as discussed below), and its unresolved war with the US and UN, must be addressed.

Over the past decade, Japanese governments have made much use of the "North Korean threat" to deepen their level of subjection to US regional and global aims, sending Japanese forces to the Indian Ocean and Iraq, endorsing a much tighter integration of Japan's Defense Forces as a whole under the US, removing barriers to their active service on "collective security" missions, and taking preliminary steps towards revising the constitution to facilitate those processes. All of these pro-security alliance measures please Japan's ally/patron and accord with the path Washington has consistently urged on Japan. In February 2007 former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and his bi-partisan Washington committee spelled out US foreign policy goals for the coming period to 2020. To lift the alliance to its next phase, Japan was asked to: strengthen the state, revise the constitution, adopt a permanent law to authorize regular overseas dispatch of Japanese forces, step up the military budget, and make explicit support for the principle of use of force in settling international disputes.[1]

Today, Japan steadily ramps up its military preparations (inter alia investing billions of dollars on unproven missile defence systems), calls for overthrowing the North Korean regime,[2] moves towards claiming pre-emptive (i.e. aggressive) strike entitlement,[3] and is moving toward embracing the view that nuclear weapons would not breach its peace constitution. Not only the US but Japan's major allies and trading partners (Australia included) encourage it in its hostility to North Korea, its moves to revise its constitution and "normalize" its military.[4] The unresolved bitterness and hostility of the Japan-North Korea relationship steadily spreads, affecting the Northeast Asia region, the United Nations and the world. The "North Korea problem" is also deeply intertwined with Japan's fraught identity problem of its own identity and role.

The term "North Korea problem" as framed by American and Japanese policy makers begs a large question. It assumes an irrational, aggressive and nuclear obsessed North Korea being restrained and disciplined by a rational, globally responsible United States backed by Japan and other nations. To frame the problem in this way, however, is to ignore the matrix of a century's history — colonialism (in the extreme form of attempted national assimilation practiced by Japan), national division, civil and international war, and semi-permanent hostility between it and the global superpower and its allies, accompanied by nuclear intimidation for a half century,[5] and to assume that the unfinished issues of the Korean War, the Cold War, and Japanese imperialism can be set aside while North Korea is somehow brought to heel.[6]

Korea annexation. General power of attorney to Lee Wan-Yong signed and forced sealed by the last emperor, Sunjong of Korean Empire (李坧) on August 22, 1910 (隆熙4年) became the vehicle for Korea's colonization.

It is also to twist the fact that, of the countries that denounce North Korea as an outlaw or criminal state, one (the US) has itself repeatedly committed aggression, nuclear intimidation, torture and illegal killing, and refuses to be bound by international law, and the other (Japan) refuses properly to address or compensate for its own colonialism, mass abductions, forced labour and sexual violence.

1939 map shows Korea in the Japanese empire

If there is a Gordian knot in East Asian politics, it is this "North Korea problem," and Japan and the US are as much part of it as North Korea. It was not until 1995, a full half century after the end of its colonial empire, that Japan's Prime Minister expressed regret and apology for the pain and harm done by the four decades of colonialism. In 2002 a similar apology was extended to North Korea, but it was almost immediately negated. The brief and half-hearted attempt by Koizumi to normalize the relationship was blocked and reversed by a national mobilization phenomenon that, in the name of "rescuing" Japanese abductees from North Korea, committed itself to regime change and to toppling North Korea's government.

Koizumi Junichiro and Kim Jong-il in Pyongyang

As Northeast Asia's Six-Party Talks between 2003 and 2008 (and especially in February and October 2007 and through much of the following year) edged towards a new multi-polar order in Northeast Asia, and a series of agreements was in due course signed, no country was more recalcitrant than Japan. Japan was a minority of one, protesting that North Korea's abduction of Japanese citizens three decades ago, not nuclear weapons, constituted "the most important problem our country faces."[7] The Abe Shinzo government set up a special cabinet office to address it and mobilized its global diplomatic energy behind the campaign.[8] With the advent of the Lee Myung Bak administration in Seoul in 2008 and the Obama administration in Washington in 2009, the balance shifted. From isolated protester Japan became conductor of the global orchestra, setting a shrill register of uncompromising hostility against North Korea.

Under the Six-Party agreements reached in 2007 and 2008, and in accordance with the "action for action" principle enshrined in the 2005 agreement, North Korea was to denuclearize, in stages, while a series of corresponding steps would lead towards normalization on all sides, ending the Korean War with a peace treaty and integrating North Korea within a regional web of economic cooperation. When North Korea in 2008 had almost completed its obligations under Phase Two, however, the agreement broke down. It broke down partly because the US tried to widen its terms, adding provisions on "verification" that would, if adopted, have entitled US-led teams to probe North Korea virtually at will, and partly because Japan refused to honour its obligation to provide heavy fuel oil.

Obama, having promised to talk to Kim Jong Il, made little effort to do so, instead choosing to follow the lead of Japan and South Korea in isolating North Korea. Since both those countries were reneging on their agreements with the North,[9] he was in effect choosing stick over carrot. North Korea, required to yield more than it had bargained for, and offered less than it had been promised, slowed, stopped, and eventually reversed its compliance. The common understanding of the "North Korean problem" – that it stems from North Korean stubbornness, deceitfulness and fanaticism - is thus quite false.

The spiral of confrontation and hostility steepened as North Korea in February 2009 announced its intention to launch a communications satellite. Despite the fact that space "shall be free for exploration and use by all States without discrimination of any kind" as guaranteed under the Outer Space Treaty (1967), the Security Council condemned the launch shortly after it happened.[10] President Obama said that North Korea was in breach of "the rules" and would have to be punished - as if it were a schoolboy caught smoking. The Security Council condemned North Korea in unequivocal terms, even though it could not decide what it was that had been launched. If a missile, as Japan insisted (contrary to the CIA and South Korean intelligence assessments), then the world had seen over 100 such launches during 2008, and it was not clear why only this one was threatening. If a satellite, then North Korea was endeavouring to reach skies already clogged with US and Japanese satellites observing its every movement on the

ground.

In other words, driven hard by Japan, the Security Council sent the "North Korea problem" back into intractable crisis, and escalated the threat of nuclearization, not only in Korea but the region.[11] The UN was in effect denying North Korea's sovereignty. As former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter observed, "it appears that the United Nations Security Council, and not North Korea, is acting in a manner inconsistent with international law."[12]

North Korea protested fiercely, and when its demand for apology was brushed off, proceeded with its May nuclear test. To that, the Security Council responded with even harsher condemnation and financial and other sanctions.[13] With newspaper editorialists around the world joining in with vitriolic denunciations, one would have to say that North Korea was the most hated and despised country in modern history, seen as a tin pot dictatorship to be brought to heel like a mad dog. The language has virtually no parallel in international discourse. Nobody objects when senior US officials or public figures refer to the country as "not of this planet," led by "dysfunctional" or possibly "crazy" autocrats, under a "mad" leader.[14]

Yet, everyone who studies North Korea agrees on one thing: it does not yield to pressure. Most also agree that, treated with respect and as an equal partner in serious negotiations, North Korea is tough but consistent in what it seeks and has shown in the past that it abides by agreements once entered so long as other parties do likewise. For this reason, from a US standpoint North Korea should be one of the easiest rather than hardest foreign policy nuts to crack, assuming Washington is prepared to abide by negotiated agreements.

Strip away the verbiage of the Security Council 2009 pronouncements on the North Korea problem, however, and what they do is, first, condemn the exercise of a sovereign right guaranteed under an international treaty, and, second, condemn and sanction it for conducting the world's 2054th nuclear test. [15] That test was certainly controversial and in breach of an earlier Security Council resolution, but it was scarcely illegal[16]. North Korea was driven, in the view of most specialists, by a desperate desire to achieve national security. It thought to apply to itself the logic of the superpowers: that there is no security without nuclear weapons. While both Japan and South Korea cling to nuclear weapons (the US "umbrella") as the core of their defence policy, North Korea, they insist, can have no such right. Having lived under the shadow of nuclear attack for almost the entire nuclear age, after making intense efforts to free itself by building its own deterrent, North Korea finds itself labelled a dangerous nuclear threat. Its tactics, commonly seen as recalcitrance or belligerence, are better seen as a calculated response to US and Japanese intransigence and intimidation.

The UN had a very special stake in and responsibility for Korea, having been responsible for the division of the Korean peninsula and the separate elections of 1947-48, and then having fought a war against North Korea in 1950-53.[17] Yet the Security Council, acting irresponsibly in April and provocatively in May, showed no sign of reflection on its past failures. As for President Obama, referring in June to North Korea's "belligerent" behaviour, and claiming that "We are going to break that pattern," he was engaging in great power bullying.[18] As Japan assumes a kind of honorary permanent member, super-power status, and as its views are adopted, the Security Council and the Obama administration risk replicating the tragic pattern of six decades ago, when first the Truman administration and then the UN acted out Japanese colonial prejudices toward Korea and Koreans in the course of the Korean War. [19]

The North Korea problem is best understood not as that of a violent or aggressive state but as the unresolved legacy of a century of Japanese imperialism, national division and civil and international war, marked by persistent, irresponsible international intervention and the spread of racist or Orientalist stereotypes of contempt for Koreans. What is needed now is not more sanctions but a sense of history, wisdom and humanity, and the political will to launch negotiations for a peace treaty and comprehensive normalization.

Six decades after the collapse of emperor-centred nationalism, Japan has constructed an elaborate but fragile model of "Client State" dependent nationalism. Its identity construct – a blend of dependence and assertion, unconditional submission to the United States and insistence on pure, proud Japaneseness – can only be captured by an oxymoronic term such as "dependent Shinto" or "*Zokkoku* Nationalism."[20] The North Korean "threat" plays a key role in justifying Japan's paradoxical policies and thus in blocking the emergence of any future-oriented Asian or East Asian community.[21] By framing the issue of abductions of Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s as a unique North Korean crime against Japan, Japan feeds a victim complex and resentment that diverts attention from the ongoing process of its national subordination.[22] Such a package causes rising levels of strain and frustration, anguish, and resentment in North Korea.

Three of Japan's most recent four Prime Ministers (Koizumi, Abe, Aso) shared the core, contradictory elements of this identity package: priority to service of US strategic goals, denial (of war responsibility, Comfort Women, Nanjing, etc), revisionism (insisting on the need to rewrite Japan's history to make people proud and fill them with patriotic spirit), and radical opposition to Japan's postwar democratic institutions. (The fourth, Fukuda, made tentative steps in a different direction, but suddenly threw in the towel and resigned before he accomplished anything to alter them [23].) Hostility to North Korea functions as the pin that holds the contradictory elements of the package in place.

While Japanese politicians and bureaucrats deepen their dependence on the United States, they lament their lost soul. It is because the comprehensive "Reorganization of US Forces in Japan" (2005-6) and the "Guam transfer" (May 2009) deepen subjection to US regional and global purpose that, as if to compensate, Prime Minister Abe wrote of Japan as the "beautiful country" and head of the Air Self-Defence Force, General Tamogami, in 2008 issued his famous lament for a lost country and call to "take back the glorious history of Japan," revise the constitution and cancel the 1995 "Murayama statement" of apology for colonialism and war.[24] It was also characteristic of nuclear hypocrisy and double-think in Tokyo that Prime Minister Aso, denouncing North Korea and calling for war against it, at the same time, to serve his US ally, committed $100 million in aid to help stabilize Pakistan, ignoring its defiance of global nuclear regulations (and its proliferation of nuclear technology to North Korea).

Resolution of the "North Korea problem" therefore means not only opening the path for Japan, North Korea, and Northeast Asia to a nuclear-free, peaceful and prosperous future, but cutting the Gordian knot that has long bedeviled Japan's sense of its own identity and role in the past, present, and future of Asia.

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Notes

[1] Richard L. Armitage and Joseph S. Nye, "The US-Japan Alliance: Getting Asia right through 2020," Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, February 2007.
[2] LDP Secretary-General Hosoda Hiroyuki, 7 June 2009. At the same venue, outside Kichijoji station in Tokyo, Prime Minister Aso declared that the country's security could not be guaranteed unless "we have the determination to fight when the time to fight comes," leaving no doubt that he was thinking of preemptive war on North Korea. ("Tai-Kita tatakau-beki toki wa kakugo o'," *Yomiuri shimbun*, 7 June 2009.)
[3] As recommended by the Defence Sub-committee of the LDP's Policy Research Council on 26 May and by Prime Minister Aso on 28 May 2009 ("Teki kichi kogeki ron," *Asahi shimbun*, 2 June 2009).
[4] Australia under John Howard was intent on getting Japan to scrap its constitutional inhibitions and adopt a "more active security posture within the US alliance and multinational coalitions." (Department of Defence, *Australia's National Security – Defence Update 2007*, Canberra 2007.) Australian political and media elites seem to harbor no doubts on this and, to my knowledge, no public figure in Australia supports Japan's constitution (with its Article 9 pacifist commitment.
[5] Gavan McCormack, *Target North Korea: Pushing North Korea to the Brink of Nuclear Catastrophe*, New York, Nation Books, 2004 (Japanese version from Heibonsha, Tokyo, and Korean from Icarus Media, Seoul).
[6] For some of my essays on the problem subsequent to *Target North Korea*, see The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus, or, for two recent essays, "North Korea and the Birth Pangs of a New Northeast Asian Order," in Sonia Ryang, ed, *North Korea: Towards a Better Understanding*, Lanham, Md, Lexington Books, 2009, pp.23-40, and "Northern Smoke Signals," *Kyunghyang shinmun*, Seoul, 9 June 2009.
[7] In the words of the message published in all national newspapers in December 2006. See Wada, "Abe rosen no hasan to shin Chosen seisaku," p. 89.
[8] Wada Haruki, "Japan-North Korea Relations – A Dangerous Stalemate," The Asia-Pacific Journal, 22 June 2009. This is not the place for detailed discussion of the abduction matter. Suffice it to say that the national campaign has been driven by political, rather than scientific or moral considerations, and that it has accomplished little.
[9]The 2000 and 2007 South North agreements in the case of South Korea and the Pyongyang agreement of 2002 in the case of Japan.
[10] Statement by President of the Security Council, 13 April 2009.
[11] Gavan McCormack, "Security Council condemnation of North Korea's 'UFO' deepens Korean crisis," The Asia-Pacific Journal, No 3121, 15 April 2009.
[12] Scott Ritter, "Up, up and away: The West's hysterical reaction to North Korea," "Truthdig," 17 April 2009.
[13] Security Council Resolution 1874, SC/9679, 12 June 2009.
[14] See, for example, Michael Parenti, "North Korea: 'Sanity' at the Brink," Z-Net, 24 June 2009.
[15] Other counts vary, up to approximately 2182. All agree that an overwhelming proportion have been by "great" powers (as North Korea's Foreign Ministry spokesman stressed on 29 May 2009).
[16] See my discussion in "Northern Smoke Signals."
[17] The UN, its member states and their citizens, are responsible inter alia for the way that atrocious war was conducted, including for the massacre of around 100,000 civilians by UN forces in its first year. (Gavan McCormack and Kim Dong-choon, "Grappling with Cold War History: Korea's Embattled Truth and Reconciliation Commission," The Asia-Pacific Journal, 21 February 2009.)
[18] Quoted in Hamish McDonald, "No rush to placate North Korea," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 June 2009.
[19] The diffusion of Japanese colonial prejudices against Korea to the US and beyond is a subject that deserves serious attention. On its origins (in 1945), see Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes, 1945-1947*, Princeton, 1981, pp. 126-7. The classic study, Gregory Henderson's *Korea: The Politics of the Vortex*, Harvard 1968, lent itself to the view of Koreans as chaotic and emotional people who cannot really run their own affairs and need calm, rational people - like the Japanese or the Americans - to look after them.
[20] See especially the "Introduction" to the Chinese, Japanese and Korean editions of *Client State* (from Social Science Academic Press of China, Gaifusha, and Changbi respectively.)
[21] Japan sent its forces to Iraq because, as then Prime Minister Koizumi put it, if ever Japan were to come under attack it would have to depend on the US, not the UN. (*Client State*, p. 56).
[22] For detailed analysis: Gavan McCormack and Wada Haruki, "Forever stepping back: the strange record of 15 years of negotiation between Japan and North Korea," in John Feffer, ed, *The Future of US-Korean Relations: The imbalance of power*, London and New York, Routledge, 2006, pp. 81-100, Gavan McCormack, "Japan and North Korea: The Long and Twisted Path towards Normalcy," Working Paper series, WP 08-06, US-Korea Institute at SAIS (Johns Hopkins University), November 2008, and Wada Haruki, "Dangerous Stalemate," cit.
[23] Especially on the Fukuda government approach to the North Korea problem, see Wada, ibid.
[24] Tamogami testimony to the sub-committee on defense and foreign affairs of the Diet's House of Councilors on 11 November 2008. "Murayama danwa to mochiron wa betsu," *Asahi shimbun*, 11 November 2008 (evening edition).

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