

Policy Forum 08-007: A New Policy Toward N. Korea Can Serve Japan

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By Robert Dujarric

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I. Introduction

Robert Dujarric, director of the Institute of Contemporary Japanese Studies at Temple University Japan Campus in Tokyo, writes, "But at this point it is most unlikely that North Korea, which receives

aid from China and South Korea and achieved a major breakthrough with America, will make concessions to Japan on the issue. Moreover, there is unfortunately little evidence that the unaccounted for abducted victims would be set free, assuming they are still alive. Consequently, Tokyo can use the U.S.-North Korea agreement as an opportunity to follow a more flexible strategy that will better serve its national interest."

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II. Article by Robert Dujarric

- "A New Policy Toward N. Korea Can Serve Japan"

By Robert Dujarric

George W. Bush came into office committed to undoing former President Bill Clinton's North Korea policy. Yet, in a striking about-turn, the United States has now struck a deal with "axis of evil" Pyongyang. Everything involving North Korea is unpredictable, but it appears that in exchange for some form of denuclearization, which is far less complete than what America previously demanded, North Korea will be integrated into the community of nations with the blessing of the Bush administration.

Former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi had engaged in a diplomatic opening toward Pyongyang, but toward the end of his term in office, and even more under his successor, Shinzo Abe, Japan followed a hard-line stance that appeared synchronized with the United States. Bush's meeting with the family of Megumi Yokota symbolized the president's unwavering commitment to stand by Japan.

Consequently, Tokyo found itself unprepared for the dramatic change in America's North Korea policy in February of last year. Historians could only think, though the circumstances are less dramatic, of the shock which engulfed Japan in August 1939. As the Imperial Japanese Army was fighting the Soviet Union in the confines of Manchukuo, Japan suddenly learned that its anti-communist ally, Germany, had signed a treaty with Moscow.

Many Japanese, as well as Americans associated with the Japanese government, have voiced anger at the "betrayal" of Japan. Japan's leaders had clearly believed Bush's rhetoric. They were thus shocked to see that he opted for compromise (some would even say capitulation) with North Korea with little apparent consultation with them. One of the causes for the trauma felt in Tokyo is that few officials understood that the drain on resources caused by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan would force Washington to make concessions in other regions. They also failed to realize, despite overwhelming evidence, that the Bush administration seldom lets the interests of its allies interfere with its unilateral decisions.

Clearly, Tokyo cannot convince Washington to change its mind. Therefore, Japan will have to adapt to a new situation. Though the way Washington has dealt with Tokyo has been humiliating, it actually offers Japan the opportunity to follow more effective and flexible policies toward North Korea.

North Korea itself is an impoverished state. Even if it fields an effective nuclear strike force, it is not a mortal danger to Japan. The United States has decided to work with North Korea, but there is no evidence that American deterrence against a North Korean attack has been weakened. Therefore,

the Japan-U.S. alliance continues to deter Pyongyang. North Korea, however, is important for Japan on account of the role it plays in Northeast Asian relations. A new approach toward Pyongyang would allow Japan to improve its diplomatic position in three important areas.

First, Japanese engagement of North Korea would allow Japan to work with South Korea. Though South Korea elected a conservative president on Dec. 19, Seoul will continue its dialogue and cooperation with Pyongyang, though perhaps in different ways. If Japan is on the same wavelength, it can use North Korea policy as a tool to strengthen its relationship with South Korea. It is South Korea, not North Korea, that really matters to Japan. If North Korea can help bring Seoul and Tokyo closer to each other it would be a great success for Japan.

Second, China is another element of the North Korean equation. It behooves Tokyo to try to work, to the extent possible, with Beijing on this issue. Chinese and Japanese interests are not similar, but neither are they totally incompatible. Both countries wish to keep the peace on the peninsula and to avoid a disorderly collapse of the Kim dynasty.

Third, the six-party talks may evolve into a permanent framework to discuss, and in some cases manage security issues in the region. This setup will not replace the U.S. alliances in Asia as the bedrock of peace and security, but it could serve as a useful forum for ad hoc forms of cooperation. Should this take place, Japan should play an important role from the start.

Some may argue that Japan should stick to its principles regarding the abductees. But at this point it is most unlikely that North Korea, which receives aid from China and South Korea and achieved a major breakthrough with America, will make concessions to Japan on the issue. Moreover, there is unfortunately little evidence that the unaccounted for abducted victims would be set free, assuming they are still alive. Consequently, Tokyo can use the U.S.-North Korea agreement as an opportunity to follow a more flexible strategy that will better serve its national interest.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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