Policy Forum 07-089: Japan Needs a New Approach to North Korean Abductions

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By Tessa Morris-Suzuki

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I. Introduction

Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Professor of Japanese History at the Australian National University and author of *Exodus to North Korea: Shadows from Japan's Cold War* , writes, "With the departure of the Abe administration and the creation of the Fukuda administration, the time is ripe for a new, more flexible and much more wide-reaching approach to break the deadlock in Japan-North Korea relations."

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II. Article by Tessa Morris-Suzuki

- "Japan Needs a New Approach to North Korean Abductions"
By Tessa Morris-Suzuki

When Yasuo Fukuda steps onto US soil later this week for his first official visit as Japan's Prime Minister there will be a profoundly emotional issue at the top of his agenda: the fate of Japanese citizens kidnapped by North Korea during the 1970s and early 1980s.

Just as 9/11 transformed America, so Japan changed forever on 17 September 2002: the day when the North Korean government admitted that its agents had been responsible for the kidnapping 13 Japanese citizens, of whom five were alive and the rest (according to Pyongyang) were dead. Soon after, the five survivors returned home, and from that moment on the Japanese media have been unremittingly consumed by the abduction issue.

The heat generated by the issue, however, has not always been accompanied by light. The fury of the Japanese media towards North Korea is entirely understandable. The abductions were a bizarre and cruel violation of human rights, not to mention of Japanese sovereignty.

But outrage in Japan quickly hardened into a political orthodoxy that has smothered domestic debate and failed to produce any significant progress in resolving the tragedy.

The orthodox version insists that all 13 victims whom North Korea admits to abducting (as well as others whose existence it has not admitted) are still alive, and that absolutely no progress can be made in normalising relations between Japan and North Korea until all have returned home. This is the line taken by the abductee support groups, and it was also the line that Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made a central plank in his agenda.

This approach has gained such a hold on the media that few Japanese mainstream newspapers or TV programs have the nerve to question it. In private, many Japanese journalists will readily admit that no-one actually knows whether the remaining kidnap victims are alive or dead. To discuss this fact in public, however, would invite a backlash that media organisations are reluctant to risk.

The problem with orthodoxy is that it produces rigid politics. Alternative approaches to the abduction issue have not been pursued, and indeed have barely been debated. Japanese demands to "send them all home" have been met by bland insistence from the North Koreans that the problem has already been resolved.

The result is stalemate with no end - and no closure for the victims' families - in sight. Meanwhile, the issue threatens to become a major impediment to the current easing of tensions on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia as a whole.

Alternative approaches to the abduction issue certainly exist. One of the more obvious would be to move cautiously towards normalisation of relations with North Korea, while also pressuring Pyongyang to let a Japanese or international investigation team into the country to gather further information.

Meanwhile, it is becoming increasingly obvious that the issue needs to be addressed in a broader framework; for although the plight of the Japanese kidnap victims and their families is terrible, it is not the only bitter fruit of this last remnant of the Cold War.

In South Korea, hundreds of families await news of relatives who were kidnapped by North Korea over the decades since the Korean War.

In Japan, tens of thousands of ethnic Koreans live in constant anxiety about the fates of family members who migrated from Japan to North Korea during the 1960s and 1970s as part of a mass resettlement scheme agreed upon between the North Korean and Japanese governments.

Although this scheme was labelled a "repatriation", almost all of those involved originally came from the southern half of Korea, and most had lived in Japan for decades. North Korea pushed this "mass repatriation" for its own economic and political reasons, promising migrants a happy future in the socialist paradise. But it is now known that Japanese politicians and bureaucrats energetically and secretly promoted the scheme, which they saw as reducing the size of an unwelcome ethnic minority.

Around 150 survivors - out of over 90,000 who participated in this resettlement - have managed to escape from North Korea and make their way back to Japan, and many more would certainly like to join them.

Those I have spoken to tell of the misery, poverty and discrimination they and their families experienced during decades of life in North Korea. Though North Korea bears direct responsibility for these sufferings, the Japanese government bears a large share of the responsibility for the process that sent them there in the first place.

Only a process of dialogue between the two countries can find ways to re-link these divided families and start to address this long-neglected human tragedy.

With the departure of the Abe administration and the creation of the Fukuda administration, the time is ripe for a new, more flexible and much more wide-reaching approach to break the deadlock in Japan-North Korea relations.

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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