Policy Forum 09-029: Taboo in Japan: Can Japan Think Strategically about North Korea?

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By Amii Abe

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I. Introduction

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counterproductive to constantly criticize North Korea and shout demands at them. That is not the way to honestly engage a negotiating partner - even a dishonest one. More importantly, it fails to serve Japan's legitimate national interests."

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II. Article by Amii Abe

- "Taboo in Japan: Can Japan Think Strategically about North Korea?"
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Introduction

It has been nearly seven years since former Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi visited North Korea, yet bilateral relations remain in a complete deadlock, with the abduction issue not even close to resolution. Many on both sides of the Pacific wonder why Japan-DPRK relations have hit such an impasse. A natural reaction within Japan would be to say, "It is because North Korea has been insincere and intransigent in its actions. After all, they have refused direct negotiations." However, an important point has been overlooked: domestic considerations within Japan, especially relating to the abduction issue, have greatly hindered progress.

There are several reasons for this. First, it has become taboo in Japan to even speak freely about the abduction issue. Only one opinion is "allowed," and reasoned argument is simply not permitted. Thinking strategically has taken a back seat to raw emotion and narrow-minded indignation. As a result, open discussion has become extremely difficult, and we are left with politicians who manipulate domestic politics, the media who shamelessly seek market share, and the poor Japanese public, who have to make sense of it all. Lastly, because of this "taboo," the abduction issue has become an internal Japanese dilemma, not just an international issue between Japan and North Korea. To change the game, the ball is squarely in Japan's court. This report focuses on the significant influence of media and politicians in shaping the North Korea debate in Japan.

"Are you a supporter of North Korea?"

Japan is a country with many "taboos": the emperor system; nuclear disarmament; and amendment of the Constitution. The North Korea issue is but one of many. When Japanese speak of these subjects, they must be careful because one strong opinion "rules" all of the others. Japanese are taught by parents, teachers, the media, and society in general what kind of opinion they should hold. Unspoken within Japanese culture is the belief that it is dangerous to hold different views, especially if expressed in public. This is the atmosphere within which the abduction issue is viewed in Japan.

What kind of "taboo" is this? Simply put, it is the sense that the abduction issue should have priority over all other national issues and international considerations. Japanese negotiators should not be "permitted" to compromise or even negotiate before the abduction is resolved to Japan's satisfaction. To express or support any other viewpoint, will invariably elicit the hostile question: "Are you a supporter of North Korea?"

In late 2001, a Japanese diplomat, Hitoshi Tanaka, assumed responsibility for the bureau within MOFA that was responsible for Japan's relations with the rest of Asia and the Pacific. Almost immediately, he began the task of arranging Prime Minister Koizumi's "surprise" visit to North Korea, which took place in September 2002. Tanaka held the view that Japan needed to tackle not

only the abduction issue, but also other issues at the same time, diplomatic "multi-tasking" in pursuit of Japan's national interest.[1] Because of this, he was identified by name in the Japanese media and strongly criticized by politicians, families of abductees, the media, and the public in general as a person who did not believe that the abduction issue should be Japan's top priority. On September 10, 2003, an explosive device was planted in his garage by a right-wing Japanese organization.[2] After this incident of potential domestic terrorism, Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara[3] justified the act by saying, "Tanaka brought this incident on himself. He's at North Korea's beck and call."

As a result, Japanese politicians and diplomats now tend to take a firm stance against North Korea. At the Six-Party Talks and in other international fora, there is constant mention of the abduction issue.[4] Above all, Japanese fear being criticized by other Japanese.

What Has the Japanese Media Done?

Politicians, media, and certain influential groups representing some members of the public have all worked to cut off constructive debate on the issue. North Korea's admission regarding the abductions[5] first led to a public outcry and great national indignation, which was followed by a constant media barrage on the issue within Japan. In the end, many politicians simply followed the public mood. To quote an old adage, "when the people lead, the leaders follow." Japanese anger and hostility hardened and the only "permissible" position was reflexive opposition. Within the media, several noteworthy trends emerged.

Japanese media reporting on the abduction issue has become largely based on emotion. While it is natural that the abduction issue should be reported as an important news subject, there is a tendency to do so at the expense of other worthy topics. The reason why Prime Minister Koizumi went to North Korea in the first place was to attempt to resolve several key problems between the two countries and improve bilateral relations in general. The Prime Minister wanted to discuss not only the abduction issue, but also the nuclear standoff, missile tests, human rights involving Korean-Japanese, and the postwar compensation issue, among others. At first, the Japanese media understood the multifaceted and nuanced rationale behind Koizumi's trip, but once Kim Jong-Il made his bombshell announcement about the abductions, it was as if there were no other relevant news issues to report. Everything else was ignored. As a result, it is difficult for the general Japanese public to consider any bilateral issues beyond the abductions, and the public is unable to consider even legitimate North Korean concerns.[6] It is also difficult for the public to consider such issues as negotiating strategy, and the larger strategic regional context for the Six-Party process, of which Japan is a key participant.

Unfortunately, Japanese popular media has also turned North Korea into a major topic of entertainment. Irrelevant news and trivia are reported along with emotional tales of the abductions. I was a producer for a major Japanese news outlet from 2003-2008 dealing primarily with news involving Japan and North Korea. On virtually a daily basis, my News Desk would instruct me, "Give us news about North Korea. Anything is okay!"[7] In fact, our organization received high ratings for coverage of North Korea, and relied on North Korea stories to maintain the high ratings. We deliberately sought out crazy, funny aspects of the country and played them up as much as possible.

For example, Hitomi Soga[8] is one of the returned abduction victims. After her return to Japan, Japanese authorities received information that one of the people who kidnapped Hitomi was a female North Korean spy.[9] They also developed information that this woman's younger brother was a well-known classical violinist in North Korea.[10] Japanese media had film of him playing. They even had film of his home in Pyongyang. The News Desk of my organization instructed me to prepare a lengthy report focusing on him that ran more than six minutes - the same amount of time given to a top news story. I replied, "I can do it, but why do we have to make it so long? He is not a criminal.

He just happens to be the brother of a criminal. Who cares how good his violin-playing is, or what kind of house he lives in? It's not important." My supervisor responded, "I know what you mean. But we have to make our news program interesting to viewers. It's an entertainment show, after all."[11]

Needless to say, our programs intentionally tried to arouse Japanese emotions, prejudices and anger towards North Korea. Japanese media, particularly television, simply did not treat North Korea in a balanced manner. We treated it as a show, a source of endless entertainment.

Politicians' Responsibility

While Japanese media report on North Korea with no objectivity, Japanese politicians also perpetuate the negative atmosphere toward North Korea. Many Japanese political leaders simply opportunistically ally themselves with whatever they feel is the "public mood." The short-lived Abe Administration provides a good example. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe politically manipulated the people's frustration with North Korea as a means of gaining political popularity. He frequently criticized North Korea while often expressing his passion towards the abduction issue.[12] He repeatedly told the Japanese people, "I will save Megumi Yokota no matter what." During the Six-Party Talks, his government also refused to participate in the North Korea energy assistance program agreed to by the other parties.[13]

At the same time, anyone who expressed a differing view was criticized. For instance, politicians such as Taku Yamasaki, who dared to oppose the Abe Administration policy by calling for direct negotiations with Pyongyang, also appealed to the public by saying that Japan needed to deal not just with the abduction issue, but the entire range of multilateral issues, including nuclear disarmament.[14] The Abe government and vocal activist groups however were quick to criticize Yamasaki. The media also tended to report his views in a negative light, and he was sometimes called "spy" or "traitor."

There is one question Japan has yet to ask to itself -- what did Prime Minister Abe actually do to resolve the issue? He resigned, apparently due to stress and illness, after only a year in office in September 2007. He never explained why he was unable to do anything for the abductees. Abe was followed by Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda, who also vowed, "I want to solve the abduction issue during my administration." But he too resigned without success in September 2008. Shortly after the fall of the Fukuda Government, the U.S. removed North Korea from its terrorist list. To Japanese, this was not good news and was viewed in the worst possible light: not only had North Korea deceived us, but the U.S. has now betrayed us as well.

Japanese must not always blame outside forces. We also must look inward in order to break our own taboos. Japanese tend to believe the ball is in North Korea's court, but it is truly in Japan's court as well. The major obstacle is within Japan itself, but people have yet to realize this. In October 2008, Prime Minister Aso remarked that he was ready to talk to North Korea at anytime, but North Korea had refused to talk.[15] This is not how North Korea sees it.

North Korea Is "Waiting"

At the end of May, 2008, I met in Pyongyang with an official of the North Korean government, who is responsible for Japan-DPRK relations as well as North-South Korea relations.[16] He emphasized several things to me. First, he said that it was in North Korea's national interest to make progress with Japan, and he really wanted to see this progress achieved. North Korea desperately needs Japanese funding, technical cooperation, and other Japanese support in order to rebuild North Korea. This official was passionate and said in no uncertain terms that, "I want to make progress on this issue before I die. If I fail to do it, the young generation will face hardships even worse than

now." However, the official said that it was impossible to talk with the Japanese government at the time. He couldn't do anything because the Fukuda Administration was too weak to negotiate. He frequently used the word "'weak" when mentioning Japan. He said that "Fukuda's base seems very fragile, so I feel that now is not the time to talk with Japan."

Relations between Japan and North Korea appear to be at a stalemate. Prime Minister Aso says, "I'm waiting for North Korea to change," while North Korean officials are saying, "We're waiting for Japan to change." Ironically, both sides are just waiting for the other to change.

This is not to say that Japan should just believe everything that North Korea says without qualification. The North Korean government is clearly often not trustworthy and it appears to be for the most part a paranoid authoritarian state. They have lied, and intentionally misled Japan by providing fake documentation about the abductees. However, Japan should not allow emotion and bias to prevent the creation of a coherent policy to deal with North Korea. Japan's national interest cannot be protected unless there is a viable, realistic strategy, not just social taboos, media hype and righteous indignation. To simply give up making an effort and rely on the U.S. is not an appropriate choice for Japan as a nation. The U.S. should also demonstrate a greater depth of understanding on the issue. To fail to do so only aggravates Japan's failures.

What Does Japan Need To Do To Change the Situation?

I believe that there are several steps that can be taken to break the current deadlock. First, we need to separate the nuclear issue and the abduction issue. Japan needs to remain part of the multilateral process for resolving the nuclear issue, even if resolution of the abduction issue moves on a separate track. Until now, by not budging on the abduction issue, Japan has simply become irrelevant to the important negotiations led by the U.S. and China on disarmament. In fact, quiet complaints about Japan's intransigence have been heard in the corridors outside of the Six-Party Talks. Given Japan's lack of flexibility, it's no surprise that the U.S. has finally ignored Japan and decided to move North Korea off of its terrorist list in pursuit of its own interests. Second, Japanese have yet to define what "progress" is in this case. The Japanese government often says that only when concrete progress is made on the abduction issue will Japan resume talks with North Korea about other concerns. But what is progress? The Japanese government has too often changed the definition.[17] Third, as in the Six-Party Talks, we should deal with North Korea by a process of "action for action." For example, North Korea has repeatedly requested some type of deal on the postwar compensation issue with Japan. Should Japan respond in a token or face-saving manner in order to break the stalemate? Indeed, the Japanese government has already promised to tackle this issue in the Pyongyang Declaration.

In the end, it is simply counterproductive to constantly criticize North Korea and shout demands at them. That is not the way to honestly engage a negotiating partner - even a dishonest one. More importantly, it fails to serve Japan's legitimate national interests.

III. Citations

[1] Hitoshi Tanaka, "The Power of Diplomacy," *Nikkei Publishing Inc* , Jan 8, 2009. P.108-111.
[2] The organization "Kenkoku Giyu-gun Kokuzoku Seibatu-tai" called several newspapers to let them know Seibatu-tai set a bomb in Tanaka's garage. Soon after, the police called Tanaka and ordered him and his family to evacuate the house. The bomb was finally removed by the police before it exploded. Suspects in the incident were arrested later.
[3] Shintaro Ishihara is the Governor of Tokyo who was elected in 1999 and re-elected in 2003 and 2007.
[4] The Japanese government mentioned the abduction issue at its speech at the Second and Third

Round of the Six-Party Talks in 2004. From 2007, Japan has rejected participation in the energy assistance program due to the abduction issue. In August of the same year, Japan also took up the issue in the ASEAN Regional Forum.
[5] Chairman Kim Jong Il of the DPRK admitted and apologized to Prime Minister Koizumi for the abduction of a dozen Japanese nationals by North Korean agents September 17, 2002.
[6] In the Pyongyang Declaration of September 17, 2002, North Korea's demand was clearly written," The Japanese side regards, in spirit of humility, the facts of history that Japan caused tremendous damage and suffering to the people of Korea through its colonial rule in the past, and expressed deep remorse and heartfelt apology. Both sides shared the recognition that, providing economic co-operation after the normalization by the Japanese side to the DPRK side, including grant aids, long-term loans with low interest rates and such assistances as humanitarian assistance through international organizations, over a period of time deemed appropriate by both sides, and providing other loans and credits by such financial institutions as the Japan Bank for International Co-operation with a view to supporting private economic activities, would be consistent with the spirit of this Declaration, and decided that they would sincerely discuss the specific scales and contents of the economic co-operation in the normalization talks."
[7] Based on the author's experience. Especially, it was typically seemed one year from November 2006, when author worked as a daily news producer. [This seemed especially true after November 2006, when the author worked as a daily news producer.] The DPRK news reports were required after the DPRK conducted nuclear test on October 9, 2006.
[8] Hitomi Soga was kidnapped on August 12, 1978 with her mother and returned on October 15, 2002. Her mother has not been found yet (DPRK insists that her mother didn't enter DPRK).
[9] The Japanese investigation authority, the National Police Agency, issued an arrest warrant November 2, 2007 to a North Korean female spy, Kim Myong-suk, for the suspected abduction of Hitomi Soga and her mother Yoshimi. Simultaneously, the authorities put her on the international wanted list through ICPO and requested that the DPRK turn her over to Japan. This was due to the testimony of Hitomi Soga.
[10] Hitomi Soga testified that Kim Myong-suk told Hitomi that her younger brother was a well-known violinist in DPRK. As a result, Japanese authorities discovered that her brother was Kim Son-ho, who took fourth place at the International Tchaikovsky Competition in 1978.
[11] Author prepared a long news report about the violinist Kim Son-ho that ran from November 8, 2006 to November 10, 2006, three consecutive days.
[12] Prime Minister Abe expressed three Japanese government policies: "The most important topic for Japan is the resolution of the abduction issue" "There is not a normalization talk without the resolution of the abduction issue" "Japanese government tries its utmost to rescue all abductees on the assumption that all of them are alive". In February 12, 2007, he requested the U.S. Vice-President. not to remove North Korea from its Terrorist List.
[13] On March 1,2007, Prime Minister Abe ordered a sectional meeting regarding Japan-DPRK normalization at the Six-Party Talks "To do your best to make an advance toward complete resolution of the abduction issue," then emphasized that "We want to decide whether Japan should participate in energy assistance or not. This is not the issue for the DPRK to make a decision. If we cannot accept an outcome about the abduction issue, we will never admit it in advance (we do not participate with the energy assistance)." [In other words, Japan would not participate in energy assistance.]
[14] Taku Yamazaki, a member of the House of Representatives, remarked that Japan needed a carrot-and-stick approach. He then mentioned often that the stick-only approach of Abe Administration didn't lead to improvement of the two countries' relations. He visited the DPRK on January 9, 2007 and discussed this with DPRK officials. [His message to the Japanese public was that negotiation was necessary (His remark could be seen on his web-site http://www.taku.net/voice/show_text.php3?ID=6LAAQ). The Japanese government and the ruling party were displeased at his attitude. Prime Minister Abe showed his anger and remarked "I hope

Yamazaki understands we are now trying to apply pressure to DPRK".
[15] Aso held the 2nd meeting of the Headquarters for the Abduction Issue on October 15, 2008. According to Sankei Shinbun, the Prime Minister remarked, "Japan always mentions that we are preparing for making progress the relation between two countries. We are waiting DPRK's action. We strongly urge the DPRK to return abductees as soon aspossible". (http://sankei.jp.msn.com/politics/policy/081015/plc0810151938006-n1.htm)
[16] The official belongs to an institution which controls the diplomacy of the DPRK. He met the author anonymously.
[17] The Abe Government said, "When all of the abductees return to Japan, we will call it progress", but Fukuda remarked "If North Korea agrees to establish a committee which reinvestigates the abduction issue, we will understand it is progress". The Aso administration shows their stance that Fukuda's position was not enough, but has not expressed their clear definition yet.

0. IV. 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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Northeast Asia Peace and Security Project (napsnet-reply@nautilus.org)

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Nautilus Institute
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email: nautilus@nautilus.org