

Kim Jong-il and the Normalization of Japan-North Korea Relations

金正日と日朝関係の正常化

Wada Haruki

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Translated by Rumi Sakamoto and Matthew Allen

When I heard the sudden news of the death of North Korea's leader Kim Jong-il, I felt as if I had been struck by lightning. Since his miracle recovery from the 2008 stroke, he had been busy travelling in and outside North Korea. Both he and others around him would have been concerned about his health, and also prepared for this moment. His death must have been such a huge regret for Kim himself, who was single-mindedly focusing on keeping his public promise to open a 'big gate' for a 'powerful and prosperous Korea' by the 100th anniversary of the birth of his father, Kim Il-sung in 2012. As one Japanese who has been hoping for normalization of Japan-North Korea relations for the last 10 years, I could not but grieve over the death of the leader of our neighbouring country, who, more than anyone else, hoped to realise this goal. The Japanese government and people have lost their best chance to achieve normalization. The last decade has now become a lost decade.

Japan for Kim Jong-il



Kim's death featured on Japanese TV

Kim Jong-il became Number Two in the party and in the state under Kim Il-sung, and for 20 years worked as the designer and producer of a partisan state. After his father's death, he became head of state and ruled the country under a new system of what was known as the 'military-first' state for 19 years. I will leave the evaluation of his work during this period for another occasion. For the moment, I think what is necessary is to confirm what Kim Jong-il planned to do in relation to Japan, and the words he used to convey this to the Japanese.

In October 2000, Kim Jong-il sent his second-in-command, Vice Marshal Jo Myong-rok to the US. President Clinton sent US Secretary of State Albright to North Korea on October 23. She remembered that Kim was an 'intelligent human being' who was 'isolated but well-informed' and 'neither desperate nor worried. What he wanted was a normal relationship with the US.' She concluded that the President's visit to North Korea was needed and that was what President Clinton hoped for, too. However, when Gore lost to Bush in the US

presidential election at the end of the year, Clinton's planned visit was cancelled.

Kim Jong-il then turned his attention to Japan. At the end of 2000, he approached Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro to conduct secret negotiations and suggested they aim to resolve all outstanding issues simultaneously at a North Korea-Japan summit. In 2001, Prime Minister Mori sent Chief Cabinet Secretary Nakagawa Hidenao to Singapore to meet a North Korean delegation. North Korean special envoy Kang Sok-ju, the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, said that North Korea would withdraw the demand for the compensation for suffering and damage brought about by Japan's colonial rule, and instead accept economic aid. In terms of the abduction issues, he responded 'please solve it' in the summit meeting or 'we will respond to it fully.' (Mori Yoshiro, *Shokun*, December, 2002).

Now optimistic, Kim Jong-il announced a new economic policy in 2001, expecting diplomatic relations to change. A New Year's Day Joint Editorial of the three state-run newspapers announced the policy of 'reconstructing the wholesale economy of the people with modern technology.' The word 'reconstruction' is a translation of the Russian 'Perestroika'. In order to perform 'Perestroika' North Korea needed to acquire modern technology from outside. New methods and new ways of thinking were seen as necessary. The Joint Editorial demanded that the nation 'fundamentally reform our ideas, thoughts, fighting spirit and working styles to fit the demands of the new century.' They were going to acquire modern technology from Japan.

However, on hearing Prime Minister Mori's story, leaders in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs hesitated. Soon after making a joint statement over Irkutsk with President Putin, Mori was forced to resign. Kim's idea did not materialise.

However, Kim Jong-il did not give up. When the Koizumi cabinet was born, he directly

approached the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where it was dealt with by Tanaka Hitoshi, the Head of the Asia-Pacific Bureau. Tanaka, under the guidance of Koizumi, began secret negotiations in September 2001.

There were more than twenty meetings between Tanaka and Mr. X from North Korea's National Defense Commission, and they continued till the end of summer 2001. During this time, President Bush called North Korea a part of 'the axis of evil' in his State of the Union Speech, publicly expressing hostility towards North Korea. Therefore, Koizumi and Tanaka continued secret negotiations without letting the US know about them.

The secret negotiations finally resulted in a Japan-North Korea summit meeting held in Pyongyang on September 17, 2002. Another summit took place on May 22, 2004. These two summits were historic meetings, and I must say that they became a reality because of the persistence of Kim Jong-il.

2002 Summit

A record of the two Japan-North Korea summits has been produced by Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). They are of course top secret documents. A partial summary of the first summit was made available to the press immediately after the meeting, and was reported in various newspapers. The top secret documents remained closed to the public; but finally in 2009 NHK acquired them from MOFA and made a documentary: an NHK Special, "The Secret Record: Japan-North Korea Negotiation - unknown attack and defense over the 'nuclear issue'", aired on November 8.



Kim Jong-il and Koizumi Junichiro in Pyongyang, September 17, 2002

In this documentary, Tanaka Hiroshi and Yabunaka Mitoji (senior leaders in MOFA in 2001), as well as Saiki Akitaka (senior leader in MOFA at the time of the broadcast of the documentary) made appearances and explained the content of the summit meetings and negotiations. Therefore, we can assume that MOFA leaked this top secret document with the clear intention to defend its position. Japan had just experienced an unheard-of change of government with the birth of a Democrat Party government that called for the end of the rule by bureaucrats. It is, therefore, understandable that MOFA attempted to defend itself in this manner. Naturally, the documentary explains that despite the efforts of the Prime Minister and MOFA, negotiations did not go well because of the bad attitude of North Korea and of Kim Jong-il.

Although leaking this secret document was a serious and possibly criminal act - like Mainichi's Nishiyama Taikichi's report, which exposed secret documents concerning the reversion of Okinawa - it was never problematised, and this issue was not referred to in the documentary. Putting aside these issues, the NHK documentary based on this secret document is an exceptional resource that communicates the true voice of Kim Jong-il. In combination with newspaper reports of September 18th, let us examine the two Japan-North Korea summit meetings.

The participants in the first summit were Prime Minister Koizumi, Tanaka Hitoshi, the head of the Asia Pacific Bureau, MOFA, Abe Shinzo, Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary, and Koizumi's secretary, Iijima Isao. At the beginning of the summit meeting Kim said, 'since the Prime Minister himself has set an example by visiting Pyongyang, North Korea and Japan will no longer be near but distant countries, rather true neighbours.' Newspapers reported that Kim continued on to say, 'Together with the Prime Minister, and through our joint determination, we want to open a new page in the history of bilateral relations between the DPRK and Japan.'

These words are a straightforward expression of Kim's desire to normalize Japan-North Korea relations. The NHK documentary does not explain how Koizumi responded to Kim. According to newspaper reports, the Prime Minister stressed that he 'will work seriously towards normalization,' demanded a 'sincere response' in terms of abduction and security issues, and stated his wish that the summit meeting would become a 'chance to advance Japan-North Korea relations substantially.' Koizumi's words, too, were positive.

Kim Jong-il continued: 'The relationship between the two countries was good up until Toyotomi Hideyoshi. In order to normalize bilateral relations, the basic issue that needs to be resolved is the settling of the past. We hope for a sincere response from Japan.' The implication that the problem started with Hideyoshi's 1592 invasion was a slight pressure, made with the intention of requesting that Japan reflect over compensation for their colonial rule of Korea.

Koizumi's response to this has been reported in the press. The Prime Minister expressed his intention to reflect over, and apologise for the suffering and damage that colonial rule caused to the people of North Korea, and based on this spirit promised to offer economic aid. Kim Jong-

il understood and accepted the Prime Minister's statement, and said he was 'prepared to make a judgement based on the whole situation,' and that he 'would like to discuss it following a Japanese formula.' It was thus reconfirmed that if Japan offered to reflect and apologize, North Korea would accept economic aid as compensation.

Newspapers reported their exchanges over the abduction issue. Referring to the information his office received that 13 Japanese were abducted, five were alive and eight had died, Koizumi said it was a 'huge shock' and that he 'objected strongly'. He demanded North Korea 'continue investigation, return the surviving abductees, and ensure they take proper measures to prevent the recurrence of such regrettable acts.' Kim responded as follows:

'I would like to explain the abduction issue. We have carried out investigations, including internal investigations. Its context is the decades of hostile relations between us, but it is truly an unfortunate incident. I want to talk about it frankly. We have created a special investigation committee, and its conclusion was the report which we have communicated to you. Personally, I think that these incidents took place in the 1970s and early 1980s because certain elements in the special agency became impulsive and were carried away by what they considered heroic actions. There are two reasons for their actions. First, in order that North Korean agents could learn the Japanese language; and secondly, so that North Korean agents could travel to the Republic of Korea using other people's identities. Now that I have learned of these things,

those who were responsible have been punished. No such incidents will occur again in the future.'

The documentary then reported his next words: 'I want to apologise now; it was regrettable. I will take appropriate measures to prevent it happening again.'

Following these words, Abe Shinzo appeared in the documentary, stating that he thought 'Kim Jong-Il was rather timid. We should go ahead and push.'

Such a statement shows a lack of a political judgment. Although the ultimate responsibility clearly lies with Kim Jong-il as Head of State, he offered an incredibly honest explanation, getting into such details which are well beyond normal expectations for an official state explanation, and apologised. Here I sense Kim Jong-il's political decision-making power and strong will to solve the issue.

The same thing was repeated in relation to the issue of the suspicious boats and Korean coast guard ships entering Japan's territorial waters. This too, was reported in the press. Prime Minister Koizumi said he was determined to investigate the incident in the East China Sea in the previous year, and demanded that North Korea ensure such a regrettable incident would not happen again. To this Kim Jong-il responded as follows:

'We have investigated the suspicious boats incident, and learned what really happened just recently. I did not know about this. Special services used the boats as part of an unauthorized training exercise.... I had not imagined that they had gone to such extremes. [...] I tell you that this kind of thing will not happen from now on. It is our internal problem, but we have

a number of special services, and now want to treat them as a remnant of the past.'

This also was a surprising comment. He could not have said such a thing if he was concerned about affecting the morale of the special services. But Kim Jong-il dared to say as much. And from then on, North Korean coast guard ships have not entered Japan's territorial waters, and there has been no drug smuggling either. We can see that Kim Jong-il kept his promise.

Prime Minister Koizumi said that it was necessary to create a place for a dialogue through Six-Party Talks in order to build regional trust, and that he needed Kim's cooperation. Kim Jong-il responded as follows:

'Whether Six-Party or Four-Party, it would be good to create such a consultative organization. I believe that regional trust-building will occur along with the normalization of relations between countries. North Korea is prepared to participate in such a dialogue.'

We can see that the Six-Party Talks started with this agreement between Japan and North Korea, as emphasized by the NHK documentary.

On nuclear issues, Kim Jong-il initially objected and expressed hostility towards the US:

'The nuclear issue is between the US and North Korea. This is not a subject to discuss with Japan. The US does not keep promises. It seems that the US has no desire to improve relations with North Korea. It called North Korea part of the axis of evil.' 'The US only

pays lip service. It does not take action. Do we fight, or do we talk? We suspect that we will perhaps have to actually fight.'

But at the same time, in the end, Kim Jong-il hoped for a discussion with the US:

'If President Bush wants to talk, we are prepared to talk. The US needs to show good faith. Japan is a US ally. It is an Asian country with the strongest relationship of mutual trust with the US. I would like Japan's leader, Prime Minister Koizumi, to make an effort to solve this problem.'

At the end of the meeting, the two leaders signed the Japan-North Korea Pyongyang Declaration and pledged 'early realization of normalization of diplomatic relations.' When the meeting was over and they parted, Kim Jong-il said to Prime Minister Koizumi: 'let us meet again once diplomatic relations are normalized. I expect a significant outcome from your actions.'

Kim Jong-il thought that the Pyongyang Declaration had paved the way forward for the normalization of diplomatic relations, and that other elements of the normalization process would be readily facilitated through discussions between diplomats. However, as we know, after this summit meeting Japan-North Korea relations suddenly cooled because the Japanese attitude changed. No further normalization discussions took place and Japan-North Korea relations worsened.

2004 Summit meeting

The second Japan-North Korea summit meeting took place on May 22, 2004. The fact that the families of the five returnees were still left in

North Korea weighed heavily on Prime Minister Koizumi's mind. He determinedly decided to visit Pyongyang for the second time. We can assume that North Korea naturally expected from Koizumi a renewed determination and new ways to approach the normalization of diplomatic relations. On the other hand, the international environment of the time was even harsher, as the US had begun the Iraq War.

Prime Minister Koizumi held a press conference at Haneda Airport, in which he stated that he wanted to make this occasion 'a chance to normalize the abnormal relations between Japan and North Korea, to change the relationship from hostility to friendship, opposition to cooperation.' For this second visit to North Korea, Prime Minister Koizumi was accompanied by Yamazaki Masaaki, the deputy chief Cabinet secretary, Yabunaka Mitsuji, the head of the Asia Bureau, MOFA, and the Prime Minister's secretary, Mr. Iijima. According to the NHK documentary, at the opening of the meeting Kim Jong-il stated: 'it is good that the Prime Minister has visited North Korea for the second time,' He continued:

'I would like to tell you about my concerns. If after this meeting we don't act on the what we discuss, it would mean that I had only a bit part to play to the Prime Minister's lead role, and nothing positive will be gained. Last time, we had thought that the abduction issue was solved since we took courageous measures. But as soon as the Prime Minister returned to Japan there appeared some complex issues. This disappointed us. We had thought that even in democratic societies the leader would have authority; but we were disappointed to learn that the authority of the Prime Minister as the head of the government

crumbled so easily.'

The NHK documentary did not report how Prime Minister responded to this very important statement, instead merely offering a general explanation: 'to this, Koizumi repeatedly demanded that the abduction issue be solved in meetings'; but this is clearly a deception. Prime Minister Koizumi must have expressed his sense of regret over what happened after the last meeting, and he must have expressed that this time there was no reason to worry, that he was determined to press on with the normalization process, and that he had expressed this determination at the Haneda press conference. Without such an affirmation, Kim Jong-il could not have had a meeting with Koizumi again. Kim Jong-il believed Koizumi's words.

What Prime Minister Koizumi demanded in this summit was 'a thorough investigation of the truth about the eight abductees, who, according to North Korea, had died' and the repatriation and visits of the families of the five returnees. Kim Jong-il accepted this, and promised to re-investigate the case. He also promised to return the children of the Hasuike and Chimura families, and allow a meeting between Soga Hitomi and her husband and children in a third country. Koizumi, on his part, promised 250,000 tons of food aid and medical supplies worth \$10 million.

In the rest of the summit meeting, Prime Minister Koizumi expressed his frank opinions regarding North Korea's nuclear development, and Kim Jong-il responded well. Kim Jong-il explained the intentions behind North Korea's nuclear armament clearly:

'The Prime Minister compared the benefit of nuclear weapons to the benefit of economic aid, but we do not think in this way. What we would like to tell you today is that

there is no benefit in our possessing nuclear weapons. The US arrogantly thinks that they have the means to launch a preemptive attack on us. This only makes us feel bad. We cannot remain silent if the other party is going to hit us with a stick. We came to possess nuclear weapons for our survival. If our right to survive was guaranteed, there would be no need for nuclear weapons.'

Kim Jong-il did not hide the fear he felt when Sadaam Hussein's regime was destroyed by America's Iraq War:

'America puts aside what it is doing and insists that we need to give up our nuclear capacity first, but that is out of the question. The total abandonment of its nuclear program is something that is forced on a defeated nation. But we have not been defeated by the US. They are trying to disarm us unconditionally like they did to Iraq, and we cannot accept it. [...] Judging from the state of the world today, I am convinced that we are right to think that we should possess nuclear capacity in order to maintain our right to survive. If the US says it is going to attack us with nuclear weapons, and we just wait in silence, doing nothing, then we'll end up like Iraq.'

How can we challenge this logic of Kim Jong-il and persuade him to stop North Korea's development and possession of nuclear weapons? In the context of the manner in which America proceeded with the Iraq War, Japan's supportive role in it, and Japan's

protection under the US nuclear umbrella, what logic are we to use to persuade North Korea to disarm? The questions are sharply thrown back at us. The dialogue of persuasion that Prime Minister Koizumi attempted needed to be developed.

But this time, too, Kim Jong-il ultimately hoped for a dialogue with the US. He made a desperately passionate request.

'Through the Six-Party Talks, we hope to sing a duet with the US. We will sing with the US till we lose our voice. For this to succeed, I would like to ask other neighboring countries to accompany it with an orchestra. A great orchestra's backing will make the duet sound even sweeter.'

Here is the picture of Japan-North Korea negotiation

In the press conference that followed the summit meeting, too, Prime Minister Koizumi repeated his Haneda statement concerning his determination to 'normalize the abnormal relations.' However, the agreements reached at the 2004 meeting were made meaningless following the Japanese government's accusations concerning the cremated bones of abductee Yokota Megumi at the end of that year. With repeated nuclear testing and sanctions imposed since 2006, Japan-North Korea relations completely broke down. It has been five years since then, and now many people are calling for negotiations. We need to think carefully what it is that is necessary to negotiate.

The two Japan-North Korea summit meetings and the Pyongyang Declaration are shining examples of successful negotiations between Japan and North Korea. They demonstrate the

first steps taken towards, and the goals to be gained from, Japan-Korea negotiations. They are a lesson that Kim Jong-il left behind for the new leaders of North Korea. At the same time, the Japanese government should now also return to where those two meetings left off – the attitudes towards negotiations, the first steps taken in the process, and the goals achieved – and restart negotiations from there.

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