

Normalization of Relations Between Japan and North Korea: Why Is It Necessary and How Could It Be Accomplished?

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Translated, adapted, and edited by Gavan McCormack

Abstract: Author Wada notes that following the collapse of the Japanese empire in 1945, relations between Japan and all parts of the old empire but one have been normalized, mostly long ago. Only with its neighbour, North Korea (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea or DPRK) has there been no normalization. In this essay, which is drawn from his extensive writing in Japanese on the subject and follows two earlier related essays in APJF (2005 and 2022), Wada asks why negotiations, that began in 1991, have been stonewalled for so long. Examining the forces that have shaped Japanese policy, he argues that the issue of abduction by North Korea of Japanese citizens in the 1970s was manipulated by fiercely anti-North Korean elements leading to the adoption as national policy of what he calls the “Three Abe Principles” in the time of the Abe Shinzo (2006-7, 2012-2020) government. Periodic offers of negotiation towards normalization without preconditions since then have not been intended seriously and constitute a thin blanket covering hostility. Those principles are an obstacle to normalization and must be changed, Wada insists.

Keywords: *Abductee, abduction, Dean Acheson, Abe Shinzo, Camp David Declaration, DNA analysis, DPRK (Democratic People’s*

Republic of Korea), ICBMs, North Korea, North Korea Human Rights Law, Hosoda Hosoyuki, Normalization, Kadana, Kim Jong-un, Douglas Macarthur, NARKIN, Park San-gil, Pyongyang Declaration, Sato Katsumi, spyships, Suga Yoshihide, sukuukai, Status of Forces Agreement, Tanaka Hitoshi, Three Abe Principles, UN forces, Yokota Megumi, Yokota Sakie, Yoshida Shigeru

The Present Situation in Northeast Asia - Two Approaches

A “Citizens’ Rally to Demand the Immediate Return to Japan of All Abductees at the Same Time” (chair: Sakurai Yoshiko) was held in Tokyo on May 27, 2023, hosted by a group with close ties to the Japanese Government.¹ Prime Minister Kishida Fumio declared in his welcome address that he was intent on “a comprehensive resolution of the abduction, missile and other matters, addressing the unfortunate past and normalizing relations between Japan and North Korea in accordance with the 2002 ‘Pyongyang Declaration’ by Japan and North Korea (on which see below).

And Kishida went on,

“In particular, based on the view that the family members of the victims abducted by North Korea are now too old to wait for their sons and daughters to return, and that the abduction problem is one of unshakable human rights, I shall devote my every effort to implementing the earliest possible return of the abductees ... I am personally committed to direct high-level negotiations to this effect and will neglect no opportunity to convey my resolve to Kim Jong-un and to realize a summit talk with him.”

This sounds like a fair and reasonable proposal, and it was first made by late Prime Minister Abe Shinzo in his parliamentary address on January 28, 2019 and was repeated by his successors as Prime Minister, Suga Yoshihide (October 26, 2020) and Kishida Fumio (October 8, 2022). But is the Japanese government actually trying to ease tensions with the DPRK? Or is it recklessly courting devastating war in Northeast Asia, including Japan’s nuclear destruction?

The North Korean government clearly did not think it eased tensions. Two days after the Tokyo meeting, on (May 29, 2023) the North Korean Deputy Foreign Minister, Park San-Gil, responded

“Currently, Japan talks of a leaders’ summit without preconditions, but they refer to problems already settled such as the abduction issue and the right of our country to its national defence as matters yet to be resolved. If they are trying to settle impossible demands by the same means as previous administrations, making no fresh proposal and showing no readiness to change the course of history, then they are mistaken, because there can be no way forward by clinging to the past,

which would be just a waste of time. It is the position of the DPRK that, if Japan can make a proposal not tied to the past but responding to changes in the situation and the age, accepting our different paths and seeking improved relations, there is no reason why DPRK and Japan should not meet. Japan has to show its resolve to settle the problem by deeds, not just by words.”

Three months later, at Camp David on August 17 to 19, 2023, the US-Japan-South Korea Leaders Conference addressed inter alia the North Korean matter, adopting what became known as the Camp David Principles.² Within the overarching framework of policy alignment to ensure that the Indo-Pacific be “thriving, connected, resilient, stable, and secure,” the three countries declared

“We stand united in our commitment to the complete denuclearization of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) in accordance with relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions. We seek to address human rights and humanitarian issues, including the immediate resolution of the issues of abductees, detainees, and unrepatriated prisoners of war. We ... support a unified Korean peninsula that is free and at peace.”

This last sentence frightened me, because it reminded me of the UN General Assembly’s resolution, dated October 7, 1950, which authorized UN forces to enter North Korea in order to establish “a unified, independent and democratic Korea.” Three days later, General MacArthur, commander of UN forces, broadcast a new surrender demand to North

Korea, calling upon “all North Koreans to cooperate with the United Nations in establishing a unified, independent and democratic government of Korea.” Was the new statement in fact a rejection of North Korea’s sovereignty?

The details of the Camp David statement heightened my sense of alarm. They called for consultation and coordination among the three countries.

“We, the leaders of Japan, the US and South Korea, commit our governments to consult with each other in an expeditious manner to coordinate our responses to regional challenges, provocations, and threats that affect our collective interests and security. Through these consultations we intend to share information, align our messaging, and coordinate response actions.”

Furthermore, the three leaders strongly condemned

“the DPRK’s unprecedented number of ballistic missile launches, including multiple intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) launches and conventional military actions that pose a grave threat to peace and security on the Korean Peninsula and beyond. We express concern regarding the DPRK’s illicit cyber activities that fund its unlawful WMD and ballistic missile programs. We announce the establishment of a new trilateral working group to drive our cooperation, including with the international community, to combat DPRK cyber threats and block its cyber-enabled sanctions evasion.”

The three-sided Camp David Declaration can only be described as one of Cold War hostility towards North Korea, since it rejects North Korea’s right to armed defense while intensifying military cooperation among Japan, South Korea, and the United States. Kishida’s repeated calls for a summit meeting with Chairman Kim Jong-un are nothing but a mask or a cloak to conceal deepening Cold War hostility.

A different set of principles and priorities was evident on the part of civil society in Japan and South Korea, as the following Statement of August 21 by “Prominent Figures Concerned over the Decline of Peace and the Threat of War on the Korean Peninsula” illustrates. Among the 31 signatories may be found the names of prominent fighters for democracy in South Korea such as Lee Buyong, Yim Chaegyong, Chang Yongdal, Cho Songu and Ham Seung. They declared,

“We oppose acts by the leaders of the US, Japan, and South Korea aimed at unifying the US-South Korea and US-Japan treaties into a trilateral military alliance. This is because such a military alliance would drastically increase tensions on the Korean peninsula, with the US-Japan-South Korea relationship opposing China-Russia-North Korea. Dialogue and cooperation oriented towards peace and stability on the Korean peninsula are now diminishing and the threat of war is rampant. Yet the fact is that the Korean people long for implementation of peace in East Asia and on the Korean peninsula, and for a change of government. The US-Japan-South Korea military alliance should be abolished!”

The History of the Japan-North Korea

Relationship

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) is the only country with which Japan has yet to establish normal relations after its defeat in war in 1945. The San Francisco Peace Treaty was adopted by 48 countries, including US and UK, in 1951. Other countries followed, including South Korea (1965). Negotiations opened in 1991 between Japan and North Korea on normalization of relations but broke off the following year and only resumed intermittently since then, without ever being resolved.

The issues are complex, not least because Japan was not only the ruling colonial power over Korea between 1910 and 1945 but also a quasi-belligerent country in the Korean War of 1950-53. Its territory was used by the United States, then occupying Japan, for war against the DPRK, a war in which Japan cooperated covertly with the US. In the early stages (from June 25, 1950 to September 8, 1951) it was just a matter of following occupation GHQ orders, but subsequently, in accordance with the restoration of independence to Japan under the Peace Treaty, the US forces were recognized as stationed in Japan for, among other reasons, "the maintenance of peace and security in the Far East," under an agreement between Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru and Secretary of State Dean Acheson. Japan recognized the participation of armed forces in the UN command force in accord with the Security Council resolution of July 7, 1950, and it continued to provide facilities and services to those forces.³ Throughout the war, Japan's greatest contribution was to enable B-29 bombing raids and attacks on North Korean and Chinese forces in North Korea from US Air Force bases at Yokota (Tokyo) and Kadena (Okinawa).

In this way, the relation between Japan and North Korea was that of a quasi-belligerent party to the Korean War. Independence of

Japan from US rule after 1952 was premised on the maintenance of US bases and forces.

Under the "Status of Forces Agreement Concerning UN Forces in Japan" of February 19, 1953, Japan recognized the continued existence of the UN/US forces and carried on the obligation to provide facilities and services to them even after the actual fighting ended with the signing of a ceasefire in July 1953. And it was several decades from the end of the Pacific war before negotiations even began between Japan and North Korea.

It was during the era of this quasi-belligerent relationship that the incursion of spy ships, the secret movements of spies in and out of the country, and the abductions, occurred. With the signing of the Pyongyang Declaration in September 2002, both sides obviously wanted to put this phase behind them. But, for the past 20 years following the signing of the Pyongyang Declaration in 2002, relations have remained frozen.

Pyongyang Declaration and the Abduction Issue

Yet the fate of the abductees has become an intensely emotional and politicized issue in Japan over the last two decades, with implications far beyond the small number of people involved. The hostile relationship between Japan and the DPRK rooted in the abduction issue remains the key to the Japan-DPRK relationship. Prior to the Japan-North Korea Summit meeting of September 17, 2002, the Japanese side suspected that there had been 11 abductions. It demanded a response concerning them, and the return of the abductees to Japan. On the day of the 2002 meeting, the DPRK side responded, apologizing, and stating that in fact thirteen people had been abducted, of whom eight had died and five survived. Of two other suspected abductees it denied any knowledge, saying that

they had never entered North Korea.⁴

The Japan-DPRK Pyongyang Declaration of September 2002 that the two leaders then signed spelled out the crimes of both sides in a formula of mutual apology and commitment to a new way forward.

Under Paragraph 1, the two parties promised efforts to achieve an early normalization of diplomatic relations.

Under Paragraph 2,

“The Japanese side regards, in a 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.”

Avoiding any term suggestive of reparations, Japan agreed that after normalization it would provide “economic co-operation,” including grant aids, long-term loans and humanitarian assistance through international organizations, and other loans and credits ... with a view to supporting private economic activities.” The two sides agreed that no further claims based on past criminal action by either Japan or North Korea would be made in future.

Under Paragraph 3,

“Both sides confirmed that they would comply with international law and would not commit acts threatening the security of the other side. With respect to the outstanding issues of concern related to the lives and security of Japanese nationals, the DPRK side confirmed that it would take appropriate measures so that these regrettable incidents, that took place

under the abnormal bilateral relationship, would never happen in the future.”⁵

Under Paragraph 4,

“Both sides confirmed that, for an overall resolution of the nuclear issues on the Korean Peninsula, they would comply with all related international agreements. Both sides also confirmed the necessity of resolving security problems including nuclear and missile issues by promoting dialogues among countries concerned.”

The DPRK side expressed its intention that, “pursuant to the spirit of this Declaration, it would further maintain the moratorium on missile launching in and after 2003.”

Subsequent to the Leaders’ meeting, the North Korean side handed over the report on its investigation into the abductions and shortly after the Pyongyang meeting it announced that it would allow the five survivors to visit Japan. However, the abductees’ families reacted angrily to reports of the eight deaths and the suspicions arose that those eight might have been “killed in order to conceal evidence” and that some of them might still be alive. Yokota Sakie, a key figure (whose 13-year old daughter Megumi had been abducted on her way home from school in 1977), expressed her determination “to fight on, continuing to believe that she [Megumi] is alive.”

In 2004, the Government of Japan sought a follow-up investigation into the abductees who had been described as having died and it took delivery of the remains of Yokota Megumi. When these were subject to analysis, however, the DNA attributed to Megumi was found to be from a different person. Cabinet Secretary

Hosoda Hosoyuki determined the identification of the remains to be fake. He protested, and again Japan-DPRK negotiations collapsed.⁶

Sukuukai - Negation of the Pyongyang Declaration

What happened next was that the Japanese government adopted the stance of the group most opposed to any negotiations with the DPRK. In a statement issued on September 17 (day of the Pyongyang Declaration), Sato Katsumi, founder of the Sukuukai (National Association for the Rescue of Japanese Kidnapped by North Korea, or NARKIN), demanded that the survivors be allowed to travel to Japan and a better explanation of the circumstances under which the six others whom Pyongyang acknowledged were said to have died. He described the abductions as “an absolutely unforgivable terror ... To open negotiations towards normalization while being aware of this would be a huge betrayal of the Japanese people, a diplomacy unworthy of the word.”

Sato (1929-2013), a former member of the Japan Communist Party, former General Secretary of the Japan-Korea Research Society (*Chosen Kenkyujo*) and president of Contemporary Korea (*Gendai Korია*), declared that he would struggle determinedly against any step in the direction of such a false diplomacy.

In a statement he issued on the following day, Sato referred to North Korea’s statement on the whereabouts of the abductees as “absolutely baseless ... Since the government of Japan has not confirmed the reports there are strong grounds for suspecting that the eight said to have died might still be alive.” When the plan to have the five survivors first became public, Sato made clear his opposition to Foreign Ministry Bureau head, Tanaka Hitoshi and support for Deputy Cabinet Secretary Abe

Shinzo’s call not to accept this gesture as adequate. When the surviving abductees were returned to Japan in October, supposedly on a brief 10-day visit, Sato demanded they not be allowed to go back to North Korea. The government of Japan then adopted that demand, the DPRK reacted strongly and after a single meeting the negotiations on normalization were suspended. What began as efforts to resolve tensions between the two countries ended by intensifying them.

On November 24, Sato declared that “[t]o think it would be possible to negotiate with a terror state and that it would be possible by negotiations to secure redress for terror is just to dream. Negotiations are no more than a means of struggle.”⁷ On December 10, he declared.

“I understand the present Kim Jong-il regime to be a dictatorial fascist regime ... I regard it as one with which negotiations are impossible. It ought to be overthrown as soon as possible and by whatever means... As for what is the way to solve the abduction problem, there are nearly one hundred abductees and they must all be returned to Japan. The criminal responsible has to be punished and compensation paid. There can be no prospect of any such resolution under the Kim Jong-il regime.”⁸

Also in December, Shogakukan Bunko published Sukuukai’s “The Abductee Families Struggle against Kim Jong-il [*Rachi kazoku, Kin Shojitsu to no tatakai*].” The Sato line was clear.

“Sukuukai will continue activities aimed at the return of all abductees to Japan. It may

seem that because negotiations between Japan and North Korea are frozen clarification of the abduction situation is also frozen but so long as the Kim Jong-il regime exists any resolution of the abduction problem will be difficult. Overthrow of the Kim Jong-il regime is the absolutely necessary pre-condition.”

By the end of 2002 Sato had achieved a kind of victory - over the Koizumi/Tanaka forces - in setting basic national policy.

In 2006, with Abe Shinzo as Cabinet Secretary, the Sato Katsumi line was formally adopted by the Japanese government. Hostility to the existence of the DPRK was fundamental. On June 18, a “Law Concerning Measures to do with Resolution of the Abduction Problem and with other Abuses of Human Rights by North Korean State Authorities” (the North Korea Human Rights Law) was adopted. After assuming the Prime Ministership in September 2006, Prime Minister Abe declared in a September 26 policy speech,

“Without resolution of the abduction problem there can be no normalization of relations with North Korea. In order to advance comprehensive measures concerning the abduction issue, I have set up the “Headquarters on the Abduction Issue,” with a full-time secretariat.”

From then on, Japan has maintained a policy of dialogue and pressure on the assumption that all abductees were still alive and has demanded the return of all abductees, alive.

The Three Abe Principles and Related

Policies

The content of the abduction problem campaign subsequent to the establishment of the (second) Abe government (2012-2020), which amounts to a repudiation of the Pyongyang Declaration diplomacy of Koizumi and Tanaka, may be summarized under three heads,

first, that the abduction problem is the biggest problem Japan faces,

second, that without resolution of the abduction problem there can be no normalization of relations with North Korea.

third, that all the abductees are still alive and must be returned.

It means that because North Korea could not confirm that eight abductees had died the eight must be still alive and must be returned. When one country declares, without evidence, that all those said by the other country to have died are still alive, it means that one is calling the other a liar. Negotiations between the two in that case are meaningless. It is tantamount to a declaration of hostility and demand for the other’s surrender. Consequently, although the two sides reached agreement at Stockholm in 2014 to reopen investigation into the abductions and try to resolve matters, Japan’s Abe government rejected the interim report North Korea presented because of its repetition of the claim that that eight had indeed died, on the basis of the third of its three principles. The re-investigation collapsed.

The Three Abe Principles constitute a repudiation of dialogue, negotiation and resolution, and the abandonment of diplomacy.

Concrete Measures in Accord with the Principles

Concrete measures adopted during the Abe government (2006-7, 2012-20) include: establishment of an Abduction Special Measures Headquarters under the Cabinet, opening of a week-long national campaign to expose North Korea's abuses of human rights; launch of radio broadcasts directed at North Korea, propaganda on North Korean abuses of human rights directed to the US and the member countries of the UN, publication of information on the abductions directed at middle and high school level students in Japan, severance of trade (imports and exports) with North Korea (following its nuclear tests), banning of North Korean shipping from Japanese ports, harassment of Zainichi Korean residents and organizations, exclusion of North Korean schools in Japan from otherwise comprehensive free text provision.

The result of these policies and "special measures" include tense confrontation between Japan and nuclear-armed North Korea, rapprochement between DPRK and Russia in the context of the Ukraine War, and continuing vacillation in the US-North Korea relationship (the 2017 war crisis, the collapse of the 2018 US-North Korea and South-North Korea leaders' meetings, followed by strategic neglect on the part of President Biden).

It is worth recalling the chilling warning issued on March 7, 2017 by North Korea's official news agency:

"This time the launch of missiles was performed by our artillery unit whose task in case of some unexpected event would be to attack the US imperialist enemy's bases in Japan."

On the occasion of war danger, North Korean headquarters will not distinguish between nuclear-headed and conventional weapons. And because the US is too distant a target and South Korea too close the best target will be Japan (Tokyo, Okinawa).

There are many nuclear power plants along the Japan Sea coast which, if struck by an ordinary missile would produce the same devastating effect as a nuclear-armed one.

The most important security principle for Japan therefore has to be to prevent any Japan Sea war (one that might begin with the launch of hundreds of missiles at North Korea from a US warship entering the Japan Sea on exercises, or one started by a North Korea that became convinced it was under such an attack). A war involving Japan, North Korea and South Korea would be catastrophic.

How could Japan's relations with North Korea be improved?

The only way to prevent war in Northeast Asia is by a peace and cooperation diplomacy that involves improvement of relations between Japan and North Korea and the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. To that end eight steps might be necessary:

1. We have to make publicly clear that the Japanese state and the people who live in Japan no longer support the Sato line that all the abductee victims are alive and all must be immediately returned, and the government must announce publicly that it has abandoned the three Abe principles.
2. On the abduction matter, for which

North Korea apologized in 2002, the Government of Japan's demand should be for a clearer explanation of the circumstances of the deaths, and if survivors are found, for their immediate repatriation. For those who have died, the government of the DPRK has to accept responsibility and, irrespective of whether the victims are living or dead, it must pay compensation to the abductee families.

3. A third investigation into the abductions, based on the Stockholm agreement of 2014, has to be opened. Japan should apologize for the then Abe government's refusal to accept the North Korean report and state its preparedness to accept it now.
4. Negotiations on normalizing Japan-North Korea relations need to be reopened, and Japanese sanctions partially lifted.
5. Matters to be addressed in future must include economic cooperation after establishment of diplomatic relations, security (i.e., the nuclear and missile problem), as well as resolution of the abduction issue.
6. Japan must make clear that it does not seek immediate denuclearization of DPRK.
7. Once normalization is achieved, cultural exchanges and steps to improve the conditions of Zainichi Korean residents in Japan should follow.
8. Consultations should open at the stage at which it would be appropriate for diplomatic normalization to occur.

As I wrote early in 2022,

“What the Japan that (in its constitution) has abandoned ‘the threat or use of force as means of solving international disputes’

has available to it is peace diplomacy. If it really wants to block North Korean missiles it must aim to normalize the Japan-North Korea relationship and establish non-antagonistic, normal, and if possible, friendly and cooperative relations.”⁹

Further Reading

The present essay marks the third in a related set of Wada articles in English published by the Asia-Pacific Journal on the Japan-North Korea relationship and attempts to normalize it. For the 2005 study, see Gavan McCormack and Wada Haruki, “The strange record of 15 years of Japan-North Korea negotiations,” *Asia-Pacific Journal - Japan Focus*, 28 September 2005.

<https://apjif.org/-Wada-Haruki/1894/article.html/>

In 2022, in the context of his call for a Northeast Asia “Common House,” and his critique of then Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, see, Wada Haruki, “Japan, Korea, and Northeast Asia - the Abe Shinzo legacy,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal - Japan Focus*, 1 February 2022.

<https://apjif.org/2022/3/Wada-McCormack.html/>

For Wada's detailed account of these matters in Japanese, see Wada Haruki, *Nicho kosho 30 nen shi* (A 30-year History of Japan-North Korea Negotiations), Chikuma shobo, 2022. As the “strange” 15 years of on-again off-again negotiations referred to in the Wada-McCormack 2005 paper stretches now to 32 years, the prospect of any fruitful outcome seems even dimmer now than at any previous time.

Wada Haruki is emeritus professor of Tokyo University and author of many books on aspects of Northeast Asian history (including *The Korean War: An International History*, 2014). He was General Secretary of the National Association for the Promotion of Normalization between Japan and North Korea (recently dissolved), and Adviser to the Consultative Committee on Normalization of Relations between Japan and North Korea. Thanks to author Wada for the text of the present paper, dated 16 September 2023 and here edited and slightly abridged.

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Notes

¹ See the report posted on the official site of the Prime Minister of Japan, which includes a rough translation. https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101_kishida/actions/202305/27rachi.html

² Foreign Ministry of Japan, “The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea and the United States,” August 18, 2023.

³ For details, Wada, *The Korean War – An International History*, 2014, pp. 196–7.

⁴ For details on this complex story, Gavan McCormack and Haruki Wada, “The strange record of 15 years of Japan-North Korea negotiations,” *Asia-Pacific Journal – Japan Focus*, 28 September 2005. <https://apjjf.org/-Wada-Haruki/1894/article.html/> For the Japanese government’s account, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan [MOFA], “Talks between Japan and North Korea on the abductions issue,” 6 August 2021. https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kp/page1we_000069.html/

⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “The Japan-DPRK Pyongyang Declaration,” September 2002, https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/n_korea/pmv0209/pyongyang.html/

⁶ Details in Wada, 2022; McCormack and Wada, 2005.

⁷ Keynote lecture to the National Council of Sukuukai, cited in Wada Haruki, *Nicho kosho 30 nen shi* [A 30 Year History of Japan-North Korea Negotiations], Chikuma shobo, 2022.

⁸ Statement to the Security Committee of the House of Representatives, cited in *ibid.*

⁹ Wada, 2022, *op. cit.*