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Outsized Role of the Abduction Issue in Japan's Politics and International Implications

By Soyoung Kim

SYNOPSIS

As the leaders of Japan and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) hint at the possibility of a summit, it is important to revisit the significance of the abduction issue for Japan's domestic and international politics. The hardline attitude of conservative Japanese politicians on the issue of Japanese citizens abducted by the DPRK has created unmanageable expectations for Japan in its approach to the rogue state and strained its capacity for multilateral cooperation to resolve the DPRK's nuclear weapons issue. A reframing of the abduction issue is needed to increase Japan's leverage in multilateral fora.

COMMENTARY

Speculations about a potential summit between Prime Minister Kishida Fumio of Japan and Kim Jeong Un of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) are surfacing after recent overtures between the two leaders. However, there are already tensions over what could be discussed and doubts about whether the meeting could take place at all, given the deadlock over an issue of great political importance to Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Kishida – the return of Japanese citizens abducted by the DPRK in the 1970s and 80s.

Kishida has long expressed his willingness to meet with Kim "[without any conditions](#)" to resolve outstanding issues of concern including the abductions. The possibility of a summit became slightly more tangible after Kim sent a letter of condolence to Kishida following the recent 7.6-magnitude earthquake on Japan's Noto Peninsula.

In his first public letter to a Japanese leader since coming to power, Kim addressed Kishida as "Your Excellency" in stark contrast to the usually hostile address of "[lapdog of the US](#)". In response, Kishida expressed his gratitude to Kim at a Diet session and

reiterated his desire for a [summit with him](#) to resolve the issue of the Japanese abductees.

Kim's sister, Kim Yo-jong, welcomed the possibility of a meeting with Kishida but dismissed the abduction issue saying that it had already been settled. Hayashi Yoshimasa, Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary and the minister in charge of the abduction issue has called her remarks "[totally unacceptable](#)".

The LDP has engineered the abduction issue to play an outsized role in Japan's domestic politics so as to garner public support for security policy reforms. While this hardline may have been beneficial domestically, it has constrained Japan's ability for multilateral action by [restricting the government's freedom to cooperate](#) with security partners on other issues such as the DPRK's nuclear weapons programme.

Genesis of the Issue

At the September 2002 summit with Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro, DPRK leader Kim Jong-il admitted that his government had abducted thirteen Japanese citizens between 1977 and 1983 and apologised for its actions. Since then, the abduction issue has captured far more [public, media, and government attention](#) in Japan than in Korea, where more than five hundred Korean nationals have been abducted.

Five surviving Japanese abductees and the children they begot while in captivity were repatriated from Pyongyang to Japan in October 2002, a month after the summit. However, the DPRK has not been cooperative in explaining the whereabouts of the other abductees, claiming that they had already died. When pressed for evidence, the DPRK provided death certificates and traffic accident reports in addition to cremated human remains, all of which were of dubious credibility to the Japanese. This is why the Japanese government assumes that the remaining abductees are still alive.

The case of Yokota Megumi in particular, who was only thirteen years old when she was abducted, has drawn widespread media attention. Her parents, who have become the face of the abductee issue, were invited in 2006 to the White House, Washington, D.C., and to testify at a US Congressional hearing on human rights in the House of Representatives.

Victimizing Japan, Vilifying the DPRK

Japan's conservative politicians have engineered the abduction issue to further their hardline positions on security policy reforms. In Japan's domestic politics, they have [instrumentalised the issue](#) to call for the postwar constitution to be amended, arguing that the kidnappings resulted from Japan's weakness and inability to protect its people. Abe Shinzo, in particular, had risen to prominence through his hardline position on the abduction issue. Conservatives spearheaded by Abe have pursued comprehensive reforms to Japan's security policy such as the abolishing of the 1 percent defence budget ceiling and the development of pre-emptive strike capabilities.

Some scholars have observed that the abduction issue allows politicians to [reconstruct Japan's identity](#) from an "abnormal" state and former "aggressor" state to

that of a “peaceful victim”. Depicting the DPRK as the “threat” and “aggressor” in this issue helps to reinforce Japan’s postwar victim narratives and reverses the aggressor-victim relationship. DPRK’s abductions of Japanese nationals were indeed a clear violation of Japan’s sovereignty and human rights. But as a politicised issue, it allows Japan to [blur the historical memory of its colonial aggression](#) and to trade places with DPRK as the victim.

Due to the overwhelming public reaction and attention to the issue, the opposition has not challenged the LDP’s hardline stand and politicians of all parties have formed special Diet committees to show support for the victims. There is also no political opposition to the prioritisation of the abduction issue over other DPRK-related issues.

Implications for Japan’s Reputation

With the skewed and inordinate focus on the abductees and their families, Japanese politicians have created a significant audience cost for backing down on efforts to discuss and resolve the abduction issue. This has [pushed Japan into relative isolation in the Six-Party Talks](#), a series of talks held from 2003 to 2007 to find a peaceful resolution to security concerns raised by the DPRK’s nuclear weapons programme.

During the Six-Party Talks, while the US aggressively pursued a deal to provide assistance to the DPRK in exchange for the dismantling of its nuclear weapons programme, Japan refused to contribute aid without satisfactory progress on the abduction issue. The US supported Japan’s position on the latter issue mainly to obtain its cooperation in the negotiations and to preserve the US-Japan relationship.

While the geopolitical context has changed greatly since the Six-Party Talks, there is presently a similar danger of the abduction issue driving a wedge between stakeholders, especially given Japan’s pursuit of a stronger trilateral relationship with the US and Korea. For example, the DPRK may negotiate Japan’s refusal to further sanction or censure it in exchange for the possibility of discussing the abduction issue at a summit. This could be a domestic political victory for Kishida but would cast doubts on Japan’s reliability and commitment to a multilateral security partnership.

Conclusion

For Japan, the return of all abductees is a [critical issue](#) “concerning the sovereignty of Japan and the lives and safety of Japanese citizens”. Without the resolution of this issue, the normalisation of relations with the DPRK is not possible. But vilifying the DPRK hinders Japan’s ability to resolve this and other DPRK-related issues such as its nuclear weapons programme. This strains Japan’s flexibility to coordinate multilateral action with its most important security partners, the US and Korea.

[Dividing opinion](#) among the US, Japan and Korea may be what the DPRK is targeting as its relationship with Korea has been deteriorating and it feels increasing pressure from the strengthening of security relations among the three partners.

Kishida is already in a bind for contradicting the government’s resoluteness on the issue with his unconditional approach to talks. A summit is unlikely to work to his political advantage unless he can discuss the abduction issue and be seen as making

progress on bringing the abductees home. The issue has been a useful rallying cry in Japanese politics besides helping to change the narrative of Japan from that of aggressor to victim, but Kishida needs to dissociate the abduction issue that is specific to Japan and the DPRK from Japan's participation in other DPRK-related issues if he is to participate meaningfully in multilateral discussions.

For now, a summit between Japan and the DPRK is unlikely to happen given each party's intransigence on the abduction issue. If it does, Kishida would need to consult closely with the US and Korea, particularly as Seoul and Tokyo have only recently warmed up their bilateral relations.

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