

Tokyo holds talks with North Korea over Japanese abductees

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The Japanese government is making tentative steps to open a dialogue with North Korea, initially over the issue of Japanese citizens abducted in the 1970s and 1980s and taken to North Korea. The moves have provoked concerns in Washington that Japan's diplomacy will cut across US strategy in North East Asia to put pressure on Pyongyang, and its ally China.

Japanese and North Korean officials have held a series of low-key meetings stretching back more than a year to May 2013 when Abe sent advisor Isao Iijima to Pyongyang on what was meant to be a secret visit. The two sides met again in October, then in March this year.

At a meeting this May in Sweden, Japan and North Korea struck a deal in which Tokyo agreed to lift several, relatively minor sanctions in exchange for Pyongyang's assistance in locating abducted Japanese citizens. The agreement does not cover sanctions imposed as part of UN Security Council resolutions following North Korean missile and nuclear tests.

On July 1, Pyongyang announced in Beijing, during another meeting with Japanese officials, that it had opened the investigation, while also providing a list of 10 names of abductees still living in North Korea.

Tokyo held up its end of the agreement on July 4. It eased an entry ban on North Koreans, and partially lifted a ban on North Korean ships docking at Japanese ports. The government also agreed to raise the minimum amount at which money sent to North Korea must be reported, from 100,000 to 1 million yen (\$US965 to \$9,650) for cash and 3 million to 30 million yen for money transfers.

There is a significant ethnic Korean population in Japan, stemming from Japan's colonial rule over Korea between 1910 and 1945. While many were repatriated after World War II, well over half a million permanent

residents and Japanese citizens remain. The pro-Pyongyang General Association of Korean Residents in Japan, or Chongryon, functions in Japan. Money repatriated to North Korea is an important source of foreign exchange for the cash-strapped Stalinist state.

North Korea repeatedly denied Japanese claims that it abducted some 17 Japanese citizens to help train its spies sent to Japan. However, in 2002, after a visit by Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi to Pyongyang, North Korea returned five Japanese citizens and declared that the rest were either dead, missing or had not been taken to North Korea in the first place.

Japanese governments have continued to pursue the issue. It is complicated by wider demands in Japan concerning those who moved to North Korea in the 1950s as part of the repatriation of Koreans but have not been allowed by Pyongyang to return to Japan. The number of these "abductees" could be as high as 6,500.

Washington cautiously backed the abductee agreement, but publicly declared that it had to be carried out in a transparent manner—that is, Japan had to keep the US in the loop. The Obama administration is clearly concerned that Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is beginning to pursue a diplomatic path independently of the US.

Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida hinted on July 3 that Abe could follow the path of his former mentor, Koizumi, and visit Pyongyang. "What is the most effective way to get results on the kidnapping issue? One option is visiting North Korea, and we are also going to consider that."

Just days later, Kishida received a phone call from US Secretary of State John Kerry, who clearly expressed his displeasure about the prospect of a visit. Following the call, Kishida told the media: "We are

currently trying to arrange an opportunity to visit the US to explain the situation directly to Secretary Kerry and request his understanding about Japanese efforts to resolve the abductee issue.”

The Obama administration has pressed Japan to play a more prominent role in North East Asia, as part of the US “pivot to Asia” aimed against China. Since coming to office in December 2012, Abe has done precisely that—mounting an aggressive diplomatic offensive throughout Asia and internationally, and remilitarising Japan. The anxiety in Washington is that Japan will begin to pursue its own interests, rather than continuing to play its post-war role of second fiddle to the US in Asia.

Since assuming office in 2009, Obama has maintained unrelenting pressure on North Korea through sanctions and military threats. The US has effectively blocked any return to the six-party talks sponsored by China to denuclearise North Korea. At the same time, it has given some signals to Pyongyang that a rapprochement might be possible, along the lines of Burma, if it stepped out of China’s orbit.

By making tentative steps toward his own rapprochement with North Korea, Abe threatens to undermine the US strategy by easing the pressure on Pyongyang. At this stage, the Abe government has no intention of directly crossing Washington. As a result, it has kept its diplomacy with North Korea low key, while offering reassurances to the US.

Earlier this month, North Korea followed up the initial agreement with Japan with new demands—for more humanitarian aid and for more North Korean ships to dock at Japanese ports—if it is going to continue the abductees investigation. Japan has given no indication that it will agree to these demands.

Moreover, Tokyo has signalled to Washington that it will not ease sanctions imposed under UN resolutions. Japan recently froze the assets of North Korea’s Ocean Maritime Management, the company whose ship was detained in Panama for supposedly smuggling arms last year. A Japanese Foreign Ministry statement declared: “We have no choice but to do what’s right, treating them (the abductee issue and arms smuggling) as separate things.”

At the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in Burma in mid-August, Japanese Foreign Minister Kishida sought to patch up relations

all around. In a meeting with Kerry, he undoubtedly offered reassurances over any visit to North Korea. He also met with his South Korean and Chinese counterparts, amid the ongoing hostility produced in both countries by Abe’s remilitarisation of Japan and attempts to whitewash Japan’s wartime atrocities in Asia in the 1930s and 1940s.

At the same time, Kishida met with his North Korean counterpart. Undoubtedly Tokyo’s talks with Pyongyang are at present limited and exploratory, and easily overturned by another flare-up of tensions on the Korean Peninsula. But they are another sign that Japan is determined to press ahead with its own agenda, even if ultimately it leads to disagreements and conflicts with the US.



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