

Japan maneuvering to prevent being left out on North Korean negotiations

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Tensions in East Asia remain high despite the planned summit between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un on June 12 in Singapore. Whatever comes out of such a meeting—if it even takes place—will not resolve the great power tensions in the region.

In this context, Tokyo is maneuvering to stake out its economic and military interests.

On Tuesday, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s cabinet adopted its third “Basic Plan on Ocean Policy,” which is updated every five years. While previous policies focused on economic development, the latest document has shifted to national security.

The new policy calls for militarizing areas around disputed islands claimed by China, South Korea, and Russia, including the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, Takeshima/Dokdo Islets, and the Northern Territories/Kuril Islands, respectively.

This means stepped-up radar coverage, satellite surveillance and military operations in the vicinity of these often uninhabited islands.

This third measure in particular could be used to shift Japanese military attention more openly from North Korea to China, which has always been the true target of Tokyo and Washington. If some sort of rapprochement is reached with North Korea, the maritime policy could provide the rationale for a continued arms build-up in the region and lead to sharpening tensions as imperialism sets its sights on China as well as Russia.

“With the maritime situation becoming even more serious recently, the government must act as one to preserve open access to the oceans and hold fast to our territorial waters and maritime rights,” Abe stated before the cabinet approved the policy.

“Open access” or “freedom of navigation” are

expressions used by Japan, the United States and their allies to demonize China. The latter has had longstanding but minor territorial disputes in the region stemming from the various imperialist carve-ups of the Asia-Pacific in the 19th and 20th centuries. These disputes were seized upon by the previous US administration of Barack Obama to place pressure on Beijing and to militarize Asia.

While the seemingly friendly trilateral summit between Japan, China, and South Korea recently indicated Tokyo is examining closer trade relations with Beijing, this would only serve as a counterweight to the unpredictable nature of the United States, particularly under Trump. Ultimately, Tokyo fears being left out in the cold, militarily and economically.

Washington, through South Korea, is striving to bring North Korea under its influence, which could be turned into an ultra-cheap labor platform and a base of operations against China and Russia.

Trump caught Abe off-guard in March when the US president announced he would hold a summit with Kim Jong-un. The Japanese prime minister had been reluctant to deviate from the line of “maximum pressure” on the North.

In part, Tokyo fears that a short-term reduction in tensions will cut across its attempts to revise Article 9 of its constitution, known as the pacifist clause. For this reason, Japan has continued to seize on the North’s short- and medium-range missiles and supposed biological and chemical weapons to maintain its hardline stance.

Tokyo is also exploiting the issue of Japanese abductees, which is a prominent theme in nationalist and far-right circles. In the 1970s and 1980s, more than a dozen Japanese citizens were kidnapped to supposedly train North Korean spies in language and

culture. Pyongyang claims that the issue has already been resolved. Of thirteen abductees, all have either died or been allowed to return to Japan, according to the North. Tokyo insists that seventeen people were taken to North Korea.

Irrespective of whether the North is being truthful in this dispute, it provides a convenient pretext for Japan to play the victim to a state it once brutally colonized.

On May 11, Abe again called for all abductees to be returned to Japan, making clear that his government would not agree to any economic aid to North Korea without this precondition being met. He previously stated that the only way a Japan-North Korea summit would be held is if there is significant progress on the abductee issue.

Abe seemed to soften this position, however, on Monday, telling the lower house of parliament: “To resolve the abductees issue, the global community’s cooperation is also required, however, the decisive factor in resolving the issue is holding a Japan-North Korea summit...the meeting should be a catalyst to lead to a solution for the abduction issue.”

Pyongyang’s *Rodong Sinmun* criticized Japan on Wednesday, the same day it cancelled high level talks with South Korea. It labelled Tokyo a “trouble-maker,” asserting that its “desperate efforts to escape from its situation (were) getting more deplorable day by day.” The North Korean journal concluded: “There is a way for it [Japan] to evade the fate of being left out alone in the region. It is to give up its hostile policy towards the DPRK.”

North Korea pointed to the “Max Thunder” air force drills between the US and the South as the reason for the cancellation of the talks.

Pyongyang also denounced US national security advisor John Bolton for suggesting in late April that there was a “Libyan model” for the North’s denuclearization. In threatening to cancel the June 12 summit with Trump, Pyongyang also stated that the world “knows too well that our country is neither Libya nor Iraq which met miserable fates.”

North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs are aimed at avoiding the same “miserable” ends that befell the regimes of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, which it has regularly pointed to over the years while requesting a formal peace treaty with the US.

Yet, as Pyongyang seeks security guarantees that its ruling elite will not be removed from power, Tokyo and Washington continue to raise the bar the North must jump over, if it wishes to avoid risking a return to Trump’s threats of North Korea’s complete destruction.

In hopes of being kept in the loop, Abe will meet with Trump on the sidelines of the G7 summit in Quebec, Canada on June 8 and 9. The prime minister is also requesting Trump meet with him personally after the meeting with Kim to provide details of the talks.



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