

〈Editorial〉

The North Korean abduction of Japanese citizens and the rise of the Japanese right

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‘The United States has great strength and patience, but if it is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea.’

It was US President Donald Trump's first speech to the UN General Assembly, and his uncamouflaged threat of total destruction of North Korea naturally stole the headlines around the world. But in Japan many found another passage in the speech more interesting. In listing North Korea's cruelties, Trump made mention of ‘a sweet thirteen-year-old Japanese girl’ whom North Korean spies had kidnapped from a beach in Japan. The girl Trump was referring to was Yokota Megumi, who was abducted in 1977 from Niigata on the west coast of Japan. As Trump pointed out, she was only thirteen at the time of the abduction. Yokota is only one of a host of Japanese victims abducted by North Korea in the 1970s and 1980s. In 2002, North Korea, for the first time, admitted having abducted thirteen Japanese citizens. Five were subsequently returned to Japan. The other eight, Pyongyang claimed, were dead. North Korea's stance is that the abduction issue is settled. The Japanese government, however, believes that there still are living Japanese abductees being held captive in North

Korea, and demands their release and return. This deadlock has persisted for 17 years and constitutes the biggest obstacle to improved relations between the two countries.

The abduction issue has at times put Japan at odds with the rest of the international society, which is more focused on North Korea's nuclear development. While everyone sympathises with the tragic plight of the abductees, not all countries support Japan's tendency to raise the issue in multilateral negotiations on North Korea's nuclear program. Japan's insistence on raising the issue has been criticised for complicating these negotiations. In fact, in 2008 when North Korea officially withdrew from the Six Party Talks – a multilateral forum aimed at North Korean denuclearisation – it stated that Japan was 'entirely to blame' due to its constant insistence on raising the abduction issue.¹⁾ Some non-Japanese scholars have even labelled Japan as a 'spoiler' in the talks.²⁾ By and large, the Japanese government's international awareness campaigns have garnered some moral support, most notably in the UN, but in terms of concrete results, they have not amounted to much.

Trump's reference to Yokota Megumi was therefore highly welcome in Japan, where the abduction issue still commands more interest than North Korean missiles and nuclear tests. Could Trump force the North Koreans back to the negotiating table and make them return the abductees? Yokota Megumi's mother, Yokota Sakie, now aged eighty-three, said that she was 'really surprised' that Trump mentioned her daughter in his UN speech, but noted that she was thankful for the reference and hoped it would lead to the return of Megumi, whom she has not seen for more than forty years. For their part, North Korea claims she committed suicide in 1994.

In November 2017, during his first visit to Japan as president, Trump met with family members of abductees. At the subsequent press conference Trump stated: 'I

1 Korean Central News Agency (2009) 'Japan entirely to blame for bringing Six-Party Talks to collapse', April 28, accessible at <https://kcnawatch.co/newstream/1451887943-852602789/japan-entirely-to-blame-for-bringing-six-party-talks-to-collapse/>

2 Okano-Heijmans, Maaïke (2008) 'Japan as Spoiler in the Six-Party Talks: Single-Issue Politics and Economic Diplomacy Towards North Korea', *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 6 (10), accessible at <http://apjjf.org/-Maaïke-Okano-Heijmans/2929/article.html>

think it would be a tremendous signal if Kim Jong-un would send them back. That would be the start of something.’ Trump’s statement rekindled a hope in the abductees’ families that maybe active diplomacy by the US would enable them to meet their loved ones again. However, in the following two years Trump has done very little to resolve the abduction issue, despite meeting North Korean leader Kim Jong-un three times.

The strange case of North Korea’s abduction of Japanese citizens

North Korea has reportedly kidnapped citizens from a number of countries, including South Korea, Malaysia, Thailand, Romania, and Lebanon. But the abduction of Japanese citizens, the topic here, is a particularly puzzling case. Why did North Korea abduct Japanese citizens? No one has been able to come up with a fully convincing answer to this seemingly simple question. We know from the testimonies of the five returnees that they were forced to teach North Korean spies how to ‘become Japanese’ so they could infiltrate Japan and pass as Japanese citizens. The abductees taught North Korean agents Japanese language, etiquette, culture, and interpersonal behaviour. At first, this seems rational, albeit highly unethical, but there is one very good reason why the ‘teaching’ argument is not a compelling one. As we will see, there were already tens of thousands of people in North Korea who could have performed this task. But to get to that, we need to backtrack a bit.

The end of the Second World War in 1945 also brought about the end of Japan’s brutal colonial rule over Korea. At the end of the 1930s, the Japanese government began forcibly recruiting Koreans to work under hazardous conditions, for example in Japanese mines and military brothels, and by the end of the war there were almost two and a half million Koreans in Japan. Many went back to Korea, but a significant number remained in Japan for various reasons, not least the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. After the initial exodus in the immediate aftermath of the war, the number of Korean residents in Japan – known as *Zainichi* Koreans – stabilised at around 600,000, thus constituting the largest ethnic minority in the country. The Korean War effectively split the *Zainichi* Korean population in two, with one half supporting Syngman Rhee’s Republic of Korea (South Korea) and one half supporting Kim Il-sung’s Democratic

People's Republic of Korea (North Korea). In 1959 the Japanese and North Korean governments agreed to initiate a 'repatriation project' through the Red Cross in which North Korea sympathising *Zainichi* Koreans were given the option to voluntarily resettle there.³⁾ It was a win-win situation for the two governments. Japan was able to rid itself of what it considered communist troublemakers, and North Korea, which had been devastated by the Korean War, got valuable manpower with links to the surging Japanese economy. Between 1959 and 1984 more than 90,000 *Zainichi* Koreans were voluntarily repatriated to North Korea – a country Pyongyang's propaganda told them was the 'workers' paradise on earth'. However, the repatriated Koreans soon encountered a different reality in which they were discriminated against, persecuted, purged, and generally considered second-tier citizens due to their 'impure' background as Japanese Koreans.

The point of this story is twofold. Firstly, it shows that the issue of abduction has to be seen in a historical context. While the North Korean abduction of Japanese citizens is outrageous and unacceptable, it pales in comparison to the hundreds of thousands of Koreans the Japanese government forcefully brought to Japan and elsewhere during its suicidal military adventure in the Asia-Pacific. An unknown number of these Koreans died, and others were psychologically scarred for life after being forced into sexual slavery or back-breaking manual labour. One should therefore be wary of the Japanese right-wing notion that the North Korean abductions constitute a unique and historically unprecedented level of cruelty.

Secondly, the repatriation story shows that if North Korea wanted people who could teach their spies Japanese language and behaviour, it did not have to resort to abductions. North Korea could simply have used some of the repatriates, many of whom were born in Japan and perfectly mastered the Japanese language and way of life. The motive for the abductions therefore remains something of a mystery.

3 Morris-Suzuki, Tessa (2011) 'Exodus to North Korea Revisited: Japan, North Korea, and the ICRC in the 'Repatriation' of Ethnic Koreans from Japan', *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 9 (22), accessible at <http://apjjf.org/2011/9/22/Tessa-Morris-Suzuki/3541/article.html>

When then North Korean leader Kim Jong-il for the first time admitted the abductions in a 2002 Pyongyang meeting with the then-Japanese prime minister Koizumi Junichirō, he blamed overzealous members of the secret service, who, he assured Koizumi, had been punished for their transgressions. Kim thus distanced himself from any responsibility. However, given the hierarchical nature of the North Korean state, it seems highly unlikely that a major policy such as the abduction programme could be carried out without the permission of the Kim family.

Hasuike Kaoru, who was abducted from Japan in 1978 and returned after Koizumi's Pyongyang visit in 2002, was once asked by an American journalist about the possible motive behind his abduction. Hasuike replied: 'The whole thing is still a paradox to me. There was no real reason for our abductions, or at least no reason that makes any sense. We were taken in order to be used as a chit in some future negotiations. That is the only conclusion I have come to'⁴⁾. And he may be right.

The aforementioned meeting between Koizumi and Kim Jong-il was aimed at a much belated normalisation of diplomatic relations between the two nations. It was hoped that the two countries could finally put their strained past behind them and start looking forward. When Japan normalised relations with South Korea in 1965, it offered compensation for the colonial period in the form of loans and grants worth 800 million USD (although Japan never explicitly labelled it 'compensation', but rather 'economic cooperation'). In 2002 North Korea, recovering from a disastrous famine and economic collapse, sought similar compensation. The North Korean negotiators reportedly requested as much as 10 billion USD as a precondition for normalised relations and a settlement of the colonial past. In Pyongyang, Koizumi and Kim Jong-il signed the Pyongyang Declaration which promised an unspecified amount of Japanese 'economic cooperation' and a mutual intent to normalise relations as soon as possible. When Kim admitted the abductions to Koizumi, he had probably hoped that his honesty would spur Japanese goodwill and expedite the process, with all the economic benefits that

4 Boynton, Robert S. (2016) *The Invitation-Only Zone: The True Story of North Korea's Abduction Project*, New York: FSG, p. 229.

would entail. But this turned out to be a grave miscalculation.

The reaction to the abductions in Japan

It took decades before the Japanese media connected the dots between disappearances of Japanese citizens and North Korea. After all, hundreds of Japanese disappear without a trace every year and often such cases go unsolved. Why would anyone suspect North Korean involvement? The first allusion to the abductions on the political level came in 1988 when Liberal Democrat Kajiyama Seiroku stated in the Japanese Parliament that there was a 'strong suspicion' that some disappearances were in fact 'abductions carried out by North Korea.' However, Kajiyama's statement was hardly covered by the media and the claim was not investigated further. Japan and North Korea held eight rounds of normalisation talks between January 1991 and November 1992, but when the Japanese negotiators asked their North Korean counterparts about their country's involvement in the disappearances of Japanese citizens, the North Koreans angrily left the negotiations, accusing the Japanese of fabrication and slander. The situation was thus deadlocked for a decade until the 2002 meeting in Pyongyang.

When Koizumi and his delegation returned to Japan, the news of the abduction confession spread like wildfire and completely overshadowed the Pyongyang Declaration and the prospects for normalisation. For months, abduction was the number one news story in the country. It was of course a very compelling story in its own right, with clear victims and offenders, but part of the reason for the extensive coverage was perhaps also due to a feeling among journalists that they had to compensate for not covering the story in the past. Over the course of the following months, North Korea warped into the quintessential symbol of evil, and the contrast between offender and victim was emphasised time and again. The story portrayed a greatly asymmetrical offender-victim relation, with a strong and evil North Korean state preying on weak and innocent Japanese victims. In most media accounts the abductees' victimhood was projected onto Japan and the Japanese people themselves, so that the entire nation became victims of North Korea. To many Japanese with conservative leanings, this

was a welcome change from the uncomfortable stigma Japan had borne throughout the postwar period. Much like 9/11 had become a symbol of national victimisation in the US one year before, the day of Kim's Jong-il's abduction confession, September 17, 2002, became a symbol of Japanese victimisation, often simply referred to as 9/17.

One of the biggest consequences of the abduction revelation was the marginalisation of the political left. Before Kim Jong-il's abduction confession, many of Japan's intellectuals on the left had not only supported better relations with Pyongyang, but had also dismissed, or at least been sceptical of, stories about North Korea's involvement in the disappearances. Kim's confession became a watershed moment, as those who had earlier dismissed North Korea's involvement were branded as traitors, while those who had consistently blamed North Korea (mostly people on the right) sailed up as moral champions. In several cases threats of violence were hurled at those who were perceived to have neglected the abduction issue. The most famous example is an incident in which a right-wing organisation placed a bomb in the garage of Tanaka Hitoshi, a diplomat who had set up the Koizumi-Kim meeting.⁵⁾ Tanaka was frequently criticised in Japanese conservative media for allegedly prioritising normalisation over a solution to the abduction issue. Even if the bomb did not go off, it sent the unmistakable message that friendly relations with North Korea were now unacceptable. Tokyo's governor at the time, the controversial Ishihara Shintarō, stated that Tanaka 'deserved to die for his treachery.' The abduction issue caused a toxic environment, in which past negligence risked inviting violence. The Social Democratic Party, which had maintained good relations with the North Korean Workers' Party and had denied that North Korea was behind the disappearances, was fiercely slandered for its neglect. Party leader Doi Takako issued an apology to the Japanese people, but the party nonetheless suffered massively at the polls, and Doi was forced to resign. Generally, people on the left shied away from debating the issue, thus turning the topic into the

5 Hagström, Linus and Ulv Hanssen (2015) 'The North Korean abduction issue: Emotions, securitisation and the reconstruction of Japanese identity from 'aggressor' to 'victim' and from 'pacifist' to 'normal' country', *The Pacific Review* 28 (1): 71 – 93.

exclusive domain of the right. Hasuike Tōru, brother of returnee Hasuike Kaoru, pertinently described the situation: ‘[the left] faced a shock and fell silent. When they found out that North Korea, which they had trusted, had committed such outrageous acts, they were devastated. While the left failed to speak up, the right gradually began to raise its voice. Now the left is allergic to the word “abduction”.’⁶

Since there were few moderating voices on the political left, the debate was monopolised by right-wingers. A private group called the Rescue Association [*Sukūkai*]⁷ became particularly influential. The association has helped the families of the abductees to organise themselves and has supported them financially since 1997. However this support has meant that the families have become entangled in the association’s right-wing agenda, which includes constitutional reform and a stronger and less constrained military. Many association leaders for example advocate Japanese nuclear armament. The families of the abductees enjoy tremendous sympathy in Japan. All Japanese prime ministers make it one of their first priorities to meet the families and express their resolve to solve the issue. Failure to respect the families would be a huge scandal. The blue badge that Japanese prime ministers can be seen wearing on nearly all occasions is the symbol of the abduction families, and is telling of the almost sacred status they enjoy in Japan. The families’ endorsement of the Rescue Association is therefore a huge boost to its legitimacy as a political actor.

Another important right-wing figure who has gained tremendous political power due to the issue is the current prime minister, Abe Shinzō. Unlike most other Japanese politicians, Abe took an interest in the topic before Kim’s confession, and his devotion to the issue is therefore considered genuine. Abe’s connection to the abduction families goes all the way back to the late 1980s. He was then working as a secretary for his father Abe Shintarō, a former foreign minister who at the time was a Lower House

6 Hasuike, Tōru; Kayoko Ikeda; Kunio Suzuki and Tatsuya Mori (2009) *Rachi 2: Sayū no kakine o koeru taiwashū* [Abductions 2: A collection of dialogues that transcend left and right], Tokyo: Kamogawa Shuppan, p. 86.

7 The official English name is National Association for the Rescue of Japanese Kidnapped by North Korea.

member. One day in 1988 a couple came to their office to seek advice about what they suspected was the abduction of their daughter Arimoto Keiko. Abe Shintarō delegated the matter to his son who helped the couple report their story to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the police.⁸⁾ The experience had a deep effect on Abe who, upon entering politics himself in 1993, became one of very few Japanese politicians raising the topic in parliament in the 1990s. Records show that in 1997 Abe criticised the government for only designating ten people as suspected abductees. ‘I think it’s likely that there many more who have been abducted’, a young Abe stated. Frustrated with the lack of progress, he complained that Japan’s negligence was an ‘abandonment of our responsibility as a nation,’ and suggested that the food aid Japan was giving to alleviate the famine in North Korea should be made conditional on the return of the abductees. This early hard-line position on North Korea has given Abe an impeccable reputation as a true champion of the issue. Abe succeeded Koizumi as Prime Minister in 2006, thanks in large part to his tough stance on North Korea – a stance that soon would translate into policy. Abe implemented unilateral sanctions on North Korea, something Koizumi had been reluctant to do, and established a Headquarters for the Abduction Issue, as well as a new ministerial post dedicated to the issue. Abe had to step down as prime minister due to illness after only a year, but his tough position on North Korea set a standard which subsequent prime ministers were expected to (and did) follow. Since Abe’s return to power in 2012, he has implemented some of the most significant security policy changes in Japanese postwar history, such as reversing a sixty year old ban on collective self-defence. North Korea has, as expected, been the primary justification for these changes.

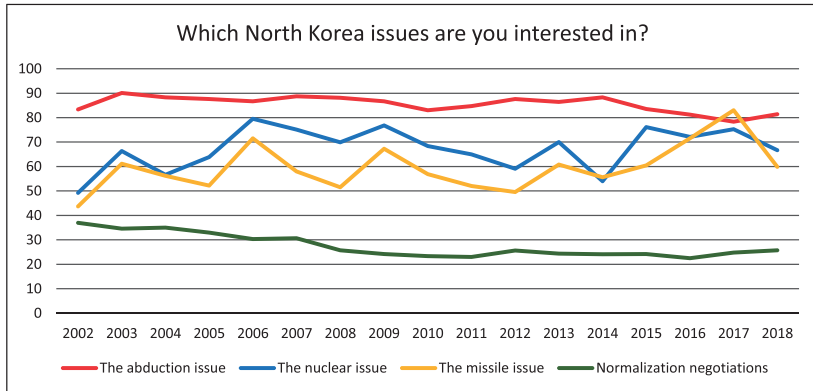
In today’s climate, taking a conciliatory approach toward North Korea is nearly impossible, but even failing to display a sufficient degree of antipathy towards Pyongyang could be risky for aspiring politicians. But what is perhaps most remarkable

8 Arimoto Keiko was abducted from Copenhagen in 1983. She was among the 13 Japanese citizens North Korea confessed to having kidnapped, but according to North Korea, she died from carbon monoxide poisoning caused by a gas heater in 1988.

is the Japanese people's unshakable interest in the issue of the abductions, despite the fact that there have been almost no major developments for 17 years. How can we explain this exceptional salience?

Why has the abduction issue maintained a powerful grip on the Japanese?

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has published annual surveys since 2002 asking respondents which North Korea related topics they are most interested in. It is striking that, with the lone exception of 2017, the issue of abduction consistently trumps both the nuclear and missile issues. But what is even more striking is that, while the interest in these latter topics fluctuates according to whether there were nuclear or missile tests that year, the interest in the topic of abduction has consistently been between eighty and ninety per cent, despite the lack of development on the story over the last 17 years. Why?



Data gathered from the public opinion survey *Gaikō ni tai suru yoron chōsa* (Survey on foreign affairs), <http://survey.gov-online.go.jp/index-gai.html>

I will venture to give two answers to this question. Both have been alluded to earlier, but here I will develop them in a more systematic manner.

The abductees are 'ideal victims'

One reason the topic has impacted so deeply in Japan is that the abductees

approximate what the criminologist Nils Christie calls ‘ideal victims’. According to Christie, a person is likely to obtain undisputed and ideal victim status if he or she meets five criteria: The victim must be weak; the victim should carry out a respectable project; the victim must be where he or she cannot be blamed for being; the offender must be big and bad; and the offender must be have no personal relationship to the victim.⁹⁾

The known Japanese abductees largely meet those criteria. All abductees were ordinary citizens, and most of the abductees were brought to North Korea against their will by far stronger North Korean special agents, without having done anything to deserve such a fate. A few of the cases involve people who were tricked into going voluntarily to North Korea by North Korean spies who promised them work there. Needless to say, these victims did not deserve to be abducted either, but since they established a relationship to the spies (although they did not know were spies) and went voluntarily, they do not perfectly meet criteria three and five, and thus obtain a less-than-perfect victim status, according to Christie’s theory. Nonetheless, on the whole, it is clear that the abductees in general represent a case of ideal victimhood, that is, a case in which the victim is 100 per cent blameless and the offender 100 per cent culpable. Such cases are particularly prone to evoke anger and disgust, and might partly explain the impact of the issue in Japan.¹⁰⁾

The abduction issue confirms the right-wing argument of dangerous pacifism

A far more important reason for the impact of the issue relates to the struggle for a postwar national identity. Japan offers an example of one of the most remarkable shifts in national identity the world has ever seen. Leading up to the Second World War, the Japanese embraced a culture of war in which dying in battle for one’s nation and emperor was considered the highest moral virtue. After the war, however, the Japanese

9 Christie, Nils (2003 [1986]) ‘The ideal victim’, in Koski, Douglas D. (ed.) *The Jury Trial in Criminal Justice*, Durham: Carolina Academic Press.

10 Hanssen, Ulv (2015) ‘Japan’s ideal and less ideal victims’, *Asia Portal*, April 21, accessible at <http://www.asiaportal.info/japans-ideal-and-less-ideal-victims/>

began embracing a culture of anti-militarism¹¹⁾ in which force was frowned upon, and the government went out of its way to limit the capacities of its military. A 2015 survey by WIN Gallup International showed that only eleven per cent of Japanese were willing to fight for their country if a war broke out.¹²⁾ This was the lowest percentage of all polled countries, and far below the global average of sixty one per cent. In somewhat simplified terms, the defeat in the war ushered in an extraordinary shift from militarism to pacifism.

There has, however, always been discontent with this development on the political right. It was not necessarily the case that the marginalised right-wing in post-surrender Japan did not see the flaws of Japan's past militarism, it was rather that they felt the attempts at national redemption and cleansing through pacifism went too far. The famous article nine of the US-imposed Constitution of Japan states explicitly that Japan is not to have a military. Even if this prohibition soon was breached through the establishment of the euphemistically titled Self-Defence Forces in 1954, Japanese governments throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s implemented a number of checks, balances and restrictions on the *de facto* military institution. The Self-Defence Forces were, for example, precluded from possessing so-called offensive weapons (aircraft carriers, long range missiles, in-flight refuelling capacities etc.) and the defence budget was limited to one per cent of the GDP. According to the highly influential strategy of one of Japan's early postwar prime ministers, Yoshida Shigeru, Japan would entrust its security to the US, with which Yoshida formed an alliance in 1952, and focus almost solely on economic growth. The strategy, which later became known as the Yoshida Doctrine, was enormously successful, and by the late 1960s, Japan had become the second largest economy in the non-communist bloc.

Economic successes notwithstanding, the political right in Japan has constantly

11 Berger, Thomas U. (1998) *Cultures of Antimilitarism: National Security in Germany and Japan*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

12 Japan Today (2015) 'Only 11% of Japanese people willing to fight for their country: Gallup survey', November 23, accessible at <https://japantoday.com/category/national/only-11-of-japanese-people-willing-to-fight-for-their-country-gallup-survey>

criticised Japan's pacifism as dangerous, both from a perspective of security and identity. By willingly circumscribing Japan's military capabilities, Japan was inviting danger, they claimed. The security restrictions were said to make the country weak and unable to protect its citizens. But pacifism was also presented as a danger to Japanese identity, as it made the population soft, subservient and susceptible to the notion of Japan as an unequivocal offender during the war. This contradicted the right-wing narrative of the war, according to which Japan had fought for the liberation of Asia, and freedom from the yoke of Western colonialism. Thus pacifism was dangerous both because it jeopardised national security and because it instilled in the Japanese a 'masochistic' sense of self.

However, the right-wing's claim that Japan's postwar, semi-pacifist model is dangerous and must be discarded failed for a long time to resonate because of the success of the model. Japanese living standards rose beyond anyone's expectations, and the dangers that the right-wingers spoke about never seemed to materialise. So why change anything?

This mentality largely remained in place until the end of the Cold War. After the Cold War several events, such as the 1993 nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula, the 1995 tensions between China and Taiwan, and especially the 1998 North Korean launch of a *Taepodong* missile that flew over Japan's mainland, made many Japanese cognisant that the country was located in a dangerous neighbourhood. However, none of these events caused Japanese casualties, and as such did not really demonstrate the danger to lives that the right-wingers often stressed.

That changed with Kim Jong-il's abduction confession. For the first time in postwar history, the Japanese right could point to a concrete instance in which Japanese pacifism resulted in the death of Japanese citizens by the hands of a foreign government. Had Japan's defence posture not been so abnormally negligent and weak, the Self-Defence Forces and the Coast Guard surely would have been able to prevent North Korean spies from snatching Japanese citizens, the argument went. Moreover, the fact that intellectuals and the media had refused to link the disappearances to North Korea, showed how naïve the Japanese had become in the postwar period, constantly

covering in shame due to their past transgressions, while turning a blind eye to the transgressions of others. The issue thus seemed to prove what the Japanese right had been saying all along: pacifism is dangerous!

To those who were critical of Japan's postwar pacifism, such as Abe Shinzō, the abduction issue became proof that their agenda was necessary and correct. That is why Abe and others have gone to great lengths to keep interest in the issue high. When Abe first became prime minister in 2006, he not only established an abduction issue headquarters and a minister, he also launched an annual North Korean human rights abuses awareness week and intensified the government's abduction information campaigns. He even ordered the supposedly independent national broadcaster NHK to increase coverage of the topic, raising concerns about freedom of the press in Japan.¹³ Finally, Abe designated the issue as the 'top priority' of the Foreign Ministry. The intense focus on the North Korean abductions has completely overshadowed the hundreds of thousands of forced deportations of Koreans by the Japanese military during the Pacific War. Abe and other likeminded people have thus turned the tables on North Korea, and in the new bilateral relationship Japan has gone from offender to victim, and North Korea has gone from victim to offender.¹⁴ Abe and other prime ministers have also used the abduction issue to justify reversing many of the security restrictions that were put in place during the Cold War. This dismantling of pacifism is what Abe aptly calls 'breaking out of the postwar regime.' This illustrates that, for the right-wing, it is not pre-war militarism which is abnormal and must be opposed, but rather postwar pacifism.

Since the abduction issue has been so important for the right's agenda to deconstruct postwar pacifism, turn Japan into a victim, and silence the left, it is likely to continue to dominate the Japanese North Korea debate in the foreseeable future, at least until the left recovers from its abduction issue 'allergy'.

13 Japan Times (2007) 'State sued for ordering NHK abduction reports', March 7, accessible at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2007/03/07/news/state-sued-for-ordering-nhk-abduction-reports/#.WgW3AIhrzIU>

14 Hagström and Hanssen (2015) 'The North Korean abduction issue'.

Consequences for Japan-North Korea relations

Many Japan observers were hopeful that when Abe returned to power in 2012 he would be able to use his immaculate track record as a hardliner on North Korea to improve relations with Pyongyang. Sometimes it is easier for hawks than doves to make concessions to the enemy, something former US President Richard Nixon's shock visit to China in 1972 demonstrated. However, a similar 'Abe goes to North Korea' shock seems unlikely, because there is very little that can be gained from it.¹⁵⁾ Normalisation is off the table as long as North Korea does not come clean about the remaining abductees (which North Korea claims it already has). Another problem is that no one really knows what an acceptable solution would look like. Even in the unlikely event that North Korea would reveal further abductees and return them to Japan, how can we be sure that there are not even more abductees? It does not seem plausible that anyone in Japan would trust North Korea at this stage. That is understandable given North Korea's long history of lies and deceit, but it also sadly means that the issue will never be solved from a Japanese perspective. Another consequence is that Japan will be a very reluctant, perhaps even obstructionist, participant in any future multilateral negotiations with North Korea exclusively devoted to North Korea's arms programs and not the topic of abduction. Finally, since the issue is taken as vindication of the right-wing maxim that pacifism is dangerous, the deadlock outlined above will likely contribute to the continued dismantling of Japanese postwar pacifism.

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15 Recent comments by Abe might indicate a shift in the hard-line position. In May 2019 Abe stated that he was willing to 'unconditionally' meet with Kim Jong-un, distancing himself from his previous position that there was no need to hold talks just for the sake of talks. Japan Times (2019) 'Abe ready to meet North Korea's Kim Jong Un "unconditionally" to "break the shell of mutual distrust"', May 2, accessible at https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/05/02/national/abe-ready-meet-north-koreas-kim-unconditionally-break-shell-mutual-distrust/#.XdJLk9VS_IU

