

# Abductees in South Korea and Japan: Enhancing Trilateral Cooperation

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## Executive Summary

As the North Korean threat has grown, so has the case for greater cooperation between South Korea and Japan. Observers have noted, and in some cases bemoaned, the lingering historical hostility that prevents more robust cooperation. Despite the emphasis on their historical differences, both countries share a tragic experience: the abduction of nationals by the North Korean regime. Unfortunately, the issue has not promoted common purpose and resolve. Instead, the failure to coordinate on this issue has hindered diplomacy without enhancing the chances of a resolution to this tragic issue. By increasing governmental and civic cooperation, Japan and South Korea as well as the U.S. can build trust, deepen ties, and recognize common values while at the same time enhancing the effectiveness of their diplomacy.

## Introduction

With the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (hereafter North Korea) fifth nuclear test in 2016 and ongoing missile development, the case for a coordinated policy response is stronger than ever. These developments pose the most direct threat to the Republic of Korea (hereafter South Korea), Japan, and the U.S., and accordingly the countries have moved, albeit slowly, toward greater strategic cooperation. One impediment to cooperation though has been the fraught relationship between Japan and South Korea, which continue to grapple with lingering historical animosities relating to Japan's occupation of the Korean Peninsula. Yet despite a recent low point in their relationship,<sup>1</sup> both Japanese and South Korean leaders increasingly realize the importance of increased cooperation, as witnessed by the signing of a new bilateral intelligence agreement in November 2016.

To cultivate deeper cooperation, this paper suggests that both South Korea and Japan take measures to coordinate around another issue common to both countries: addressing the abduction of their nationals by the North Korean regime. Thus far, both countries have largely taken a go-it-alone approach to resolving this problem. Weak coordination has allowed the North Korean government to exploit the issue to its advantage, which at times has complicated diplomacy (such as during the Six-Party Talks discussed below) while producing few tangible results. Rather than going it alone, both Japan and South Korea would benefit from closer cooperation on the issue. Working together would highlight their common interest in dealing with the human rights violations of the North Korean regime, which would enhance trust among elites and the public of both countries. By focusing on the issue as one common to both countries, international cooperation could distance the issue, which has broad resonance in Japan, from the right wing and fringe anti-Korean sentiment. Lastly, while a full resolution is arguably unlikely, closer coordination on the issue is more likely to produce better results and enhance the ability of the U.S., South Korea and Japan to address broader strategic objectives.

## A Shared Tragedy: Abductions in South Korea and Japan

North Korea has kidnapped thousands of citizens of other countries since the end of the Korean War in 1953. The regime had a range of apparent motives, including acquiring foreign identities for their spies, instructing North Koreans in foreign languages, and for use in propaganda. Of these, the largest number of abductees—estimated to be near four thousand—was from South Korea. The majority of those abducted were returned to South Korea, several escaped, but 516 of them are still missing. How many are still alive is unclear. The Japanese government's official estimate of the number of its abductees is seventeen, the second highest number of abductees. Of these, North Korea claims eight are dead. The remaining five returned to Japan in 2002, and later five of their children were brought to Japan as well.<sup>2</sup>

### South Korea

In South Korea, its abductees emerged as a political issue in the late 1990s. In 1998, one abductee escaped and returned to South Korea, increasing the visibility of their plight. As momentum grew around this issue, families of abductees and their supporters began to seek redress, not only for the abductions, but also for the discrimination that many family members of abductees faced as a result of suspected communist sympathies.<sup>3</sup> Advocacy groups pressed the government to do more to resolve the issue of the abductees, and in 2011, the government established the Abductees Committee headed by the Vice-Minister of Unification.

Still, the issue of abductees has been far less prominent than in Japan due to other major unresolved issues, including POWs remaining in the North from the Korean War (1950 to 1953) and over 100,000 families that remain separated from the division of the Korean Peninsula. Prior to the second North-South Summit in 2007, one poll asked South Koreans to list the top priority for the summit, revealing that abductions were perceived to be the lowest priority - nuclear weapons was the top priority followed

by easing military tension.<sup>4</sup> The government has subordinated the issue to other larger foreign policy priorities, such as former President Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy, to improve inter-Korean relations and more recently, pressuring North Korea to end provocations and its nuclear program. The South Korean government though has used the UN to raise awareness about the abductee issue and other North Korean human rights abuses.

## Japan

The Japanese government's approach to the abductee issue has been driven by domestic politics. The issue of abductees came into full public view in 2002 when Prime Minister Koizumi visited Pyongyang as a step toward normalization. During this historic visit, Kim Jong Il acknowledged and expressed remorse to Koizumi that North Korea had abducted thirteen Japanese nationals, reporting that five were still alive and eight had died. There had long been suspicions of abductions, but the spontaneous revelation sparked a public backlash, which ultimately led to the derailment of normalization talks.

In the aftermath of the revelation, the outrage increased when the evidence provided by North Korea to verify the deaths proved dubious.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to South Korea, the issue of abductees rose to the top of the political agenda. Indeed, a poll right after the 2002 Pyongyang Summit showed that the Japanese had much greater interest in the abductee issue than North Korea's nuclear program, a pattern that has persisted in subsequent years.<sup>6</sup> Shinzo Abe, who as Koizumi's Chief Cabinet Secretary had openly broken ranks with him over the issue, rose to power in 2006 in part by taking a hard-line stance. Prime Minister Abe declared that the issue of abductions was "the most important problem our country faces" and then formed The Headquarters on the Abduction Issue, which he personally chaired.<sup>7</sup> Upon coming back to power at the end of 2012, Prime Minister Abe promised resolution of the issue during his tenure in office.

Since the official acknowledgement that North Korea had kidnapped Japanese citizens, the Japanese government has taken a variety of measures—including a series of carrots and sticks—to seek a resolution to the issue. The Japanese government has held out normalization and the promise of aid to entice the North Korean regime into a satisfactory resolution. It has also employed unilateral sanctions against North Korea and advocated at different times for a widening of sanctions. The Japanese government has also used other multilateral fora to advance its case, including the UN.

### **Why Broader Coordination is Needed**

Thus far, there has been limited cooperation on the issue of the abductees, and at times, the governments of South Korea, Japan and the U.S. have been at odds. There are good reasons though that these countries, in particular Japan and South Korea, should pursue enhanced cooperation. First, the lack of cooperation hinders diplomatic coordination. From 2003 to 2008, China, Japan, North Korea, Russia, South Korea, and the U.S. held the Six-Party Talks on the North Korean nuclear program. During these negotiations, the failure to coordinate positions on the abductee issue created opportunities for North Korea to create a wedge between natural allies—the U.S., South Korea and Japan. The Japanese side understandably pushed for a resolution of the abduction issue, but North Korea used the issue to isolate Japan. The Japanese government refused to provide aid as part of a deal for denuclearization, but the other parties went forward with the deal. Tension between the U.S. and Japan also emerged when the U.S. dropped North Korea from a list of state sponsors of terror, despite previous indication that delisting North Korea would be contingent on progress on the abductee issue.<sup>8</sup>

Despite this experience, the U.S., South Korea, and Japan have yet to figure out an effective way both to address the issue of abductees and pursue a coordinated approach to North Korea. The Japanese side, even under the hawkish current Prime Minister Abe, has pursued an

independent approach focused on normalization and the settlement of the abductee issue. As recently as May 2014, the Abe government lifted some sanctions, although sanctions were stiffened in the wake of additional nuclear tests. At times, these negotiations have surprised both South Korea and the U.S. When Prime Minister Abe sent a special adviser to Pyongyang in May 2013 to discuss the abduction issue, neither the South Korean nor the U.S. governments had received notification. Indeed, one South Korean official described the move as “not helpful” and urged a united front between all three countries.<sup>9</sup>

Second, it is unlikely that the lack of coordination is likely to have an upside. From the perspective of the Japanese government and people, one can fully appreciate the desire to settle this painful issue. It is also not surprising that the Japanese government has pursued an independent policy to seek a resolution; indeed, the U.S. has not always been as sympathetic to the Japanese side or fully appreciated the domestic pressure on the government to do something about it. Yet at the same time, the prospects of Japan successfully resolving this issue bilaterally are quite dim. On the one hand, even if North Korea made a good faith effort to normalize relations, Japan faces constraints in terms of the carrot that it might offer. Restoring trade relations and providing aid would come up against Japanese security interests in pressuring the North Korean regime to slow or freeze its nuclear and missile development. On the other hand, there is little strategic incentive for North Korea to negotiate in good faith to resolve the issue given its utility as an issue that it can manipulate to its advantage.

Third, by failing to coordinate, Japan and South Korea are missing an opportunity to build trust and articulate a common interest amongst themselves. Despite the fact that both South Korean and Japanese nationals have been abducted, the issue has provided little sense of solidarity. In fact, in some ways the abductions have undermined goodwill between the countries. In Japan, there is widespread outrage toward North Korea,

but elements of the right wing—such as the activist group National Association for the Rescue of Japanese Kidnapped by North Korea—have exploited this issue. The kidnappings have also fed fringe anti-Korean sentiment in Japan.<sup>10</sup> Protestors have publicly directed hate speech and threats toward Koreans, a development that damages the image of Japanese among South Koreans.

## **A Path Forward**

There are two areas where cooperation can be enhanced. First, the government and civic groups should emphasize the common plight of the victims in Japan and South Korea. South Korea has more abductees, but the issue has been a relatively low priority. In Japan the issue has largely been framed as a Japanese-specific tragedy. Steps to emphasize a shared experience can raise the visibility of the issue in South Korea. Such measures may increase South Korean awareness of the broad resonance of the issue in Japan and increase recognition that it is more than just a rallying cry for the right wing. Cross-national cooperation could also help dilute the influence of right wing and fringe anti-Korean protesters in shaping the narrative in Japan.

Second, regular dialogues should be held to foster cooperation on the abductee issue. Given different priorities and varying democratic pressures, there are limitations to the extent to which policies can be aligned. Still, bilateral meetings between South Korea and Japan can provide an opportunity to share information, discuss standards for what would constitute a satisfactory North Korean response, and coordinate policy responses so as to avoid surprises or limit opportunities for North Korea exploitation. Trilateral dialogue with the U.S. also would improve coordination of policy responses. Regular meetings might add consistency to the United States' messaging to its partners and also help avoid policy shifts that undermine trust. ■

## Chapter Endnotes

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1. The heads of state from both countries did not meet between 2012 and November 2015.
2. Celeste L Arrington, *Accidental Activists: Victim Movements and Government Accountability in Japan and South Korea* (Cornell University Press, 2016).
3. Ibid.
4. Cited in Ibid., 182.
5. This included remains the North Korean regime sent of Yokota Megumi, who had been abducted at age thirteen. The Japanese side argues that DNA tests indicated that the remains were not those of Megumi although this conclusion itself has been controversial.
6. Seung Hyok Lee, *Japanese Society and the Politics of the North Korean Threat* (University of Toronto Press, 2016), 83.
7. Wada Haruki, “Japan-North Korea Relations—a Dangerous Stalemate,” *Asia-Pacific Journal* (2009): 4.
8. Emma Chanlett-Avery, “North Korea’s Abduction of Japanese Citizens and the Six-Party Talks,” *CRS Report for Congress* (March 19, 2008).
9. “U.S. Briefed on Abe Aide Iijima’s Surprise Pyongyang Visit,” *Kyodo News*, May 17, 2013.
10. Ryuta Itagaki, “The Anatomy of Korea-Phobia in Japan,” *Japanese Studies* 35, no. 1 (2015).