

# **Korea and the Rapidly Advancing Relationship between North Korea and Japan**

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Since the inauguration of the Abe administration, Japan changed its hardline policy against North Korea. North Korea is showing an attitude of actively using such policy change of Japan regarding North Korea. North Korea and Japan recently started to rapidly approach each other. This article seeks to examine why such rapid change has occurred and how the relationship between North Korea and Japan will unfold in the future.

## **Six-Party Talks and the Abduction Issue**

During the six-party talks undertaken over six times from 2003 to 2007, Japan emphasized that an agreement on resolving the issue of abduction of Japanese people must be formed between Japan and North Korea, while simultaneously resolving the nuclear issue of North Korea. Such trend began to clearly appear after the inauguration of the first Abe administration (September 2006 - September 2007). At the time, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo of Japan led the hardline policy against North Korea and expressed a strong will to resolve the abduction issue. Afterwards, the six-party talks were essentially suspended due to the freeze of funding to North Korea that occurred during the sixth six-party talks in 2007.

## **Suspension of Six-Party Talks and ‘Satellite’ Launching by North Korea**

Then, an incident that eliminated the possibility of resuming the suspended six-party talks occurred on April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009. That day, North Korea launched an object designated as a ‘satellite.’ According to the Defense Agency of Japan, the first stage rocket separated from the launched ‘object’ fell down at the location 280km west of Akita Prefecture of Japan, and the second stage rocket was tracked by radar up to the sky over the Pacific Ocean, 2,100km to the east of Japan, however, was not able to be confirmed of what happened afterwards. Regarding the so-called ‘satellite’ launch, North Korea had reported to an international organization that it will launch a ‘satellite’ between April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2009 and April 8<sup>th</sup>.

However, the world uniformly criticized that the object launched by North Korea was not a satellite, but a missile. Japan actively promoted the adoption of a 'condemnation resolution against North Korea' by the UN regarding the 'missile launch' by North Korea. However, such efforts ended in barely drawing out criticism towards North Korea in a weak form of 'presidential statement' in the end, due to the uncooperative attitudes of China and Russia.

North Korea's response to the 'presidential statement' was to express its intent to break away from the six-party talks after criticizing Japan on April 14<sup>th</sup>. Not only that, North Korea declared that it 'will strengthen its self-nuclear deterrent force' again, untie the 'nuclear facilities seal' that had been halted since July 2007, and deport the inspection team of IAEA outside the country. The 'North Korea criticism' led by Japan resulted in ruining the six-party talks, as a result. At this point, the relationship between North Korea and Japan was at its worst. The prime minister of Japan at the time was Aso Taro, a promoter of a hardline policy towards North Korea, just as Abe Shinzo currently is.

### **Change of Policy on North Korea within Japan**

Subsequently, Japan was within shooting range of the Rodong missile that was developed by North Korea and it was clear that all of the Japanese islands would come within range of North Korea's nuclear missiles if North Korea continued its nuclear development. This fact became the highest risk factor for the security assurance of Japan. After the suspension of the six-party talks, many opinions from Japan's North Korea experts came out that the hardline policy towards North Korea reached a limit. The diagnosis by Japan's North Korea experts was that the North Korea policy basis by the Liberal Democratic Party right wing, including Abe Shinzo, promoting 'abduction issue settlement first, and establishment of diplomatic relationship between North Korea and Japan afterwards' drove the relationship of North Korea and Japan into ruins. Thus, they started to suggest a need to change the North Korea policy from the previous hardcore stance. Opinions advising to reverse the prior and latter policies or to loosen the hardline policy to a certain extent and prioritize relationship improvement with North Korea began to surface.

The point of time when the policy of the Liberal Democratic Party changed, to improve the relationship between North Korea and Japan by actively utilizing the fact that the restrictions towards North Korea imposed only by Japan can be independently resolved by Japan, regardless of the UN resolution, pursuant to the opinions of several specialists within Japan, seems to be the latter part of 2013.

### **Dispatch to North Korea by Iijima**

Just in time, the second Abe administration was inaugurated, as the Liberal Democratic Party overwhelmingly won the House of Representatives voting of Japan in December 2012. As planned, the second Abe administration started to seek a method of changing its previous hardline policy

towards North Korea into an appeasement policy. The hardline policy towards North Korea by Japan resulted in having an opposite effect in resolving the abduction issue, thus, the reality of Japan's loss of its diplomatic card towards North Korea became an opportunity for the second Abe administration to substantially change the policy towards North Korea.

The visit to North Korea by Iijima Isao, the advisor of the cabinet, on May 14, 2013, became the signal of showing Japan's improvement regarding the North Korea and Japan relationship. Regarding this issue, the Hankyoreh Daily Newspaper reported as follows.

‘(ellipsis) Iijima Isao, the advisor of the cabinet of Japan, consecutively met Young-il Kim, the secretary of the international affairs of the Labor Party, and Young-nam Kim, the chairman of the Supreme People's Assembly, of North Korea. When considering the fact that Iijima practically appeared as the special envoy of Prime Minister Abe, it is likely that a considerably in-depth conversation was exchanged. The position of both sides supports the atmosphere of the conversation. Prime Minister Abe sought to create a breakthrough in the Japanese abduction issue before the Upper House voting to be implemented at the end of July (2013), and North Korea attempted to create a fissure in the international sanctions on North Korea through the conversation with Japan. Of course, it would be difficult to make a huge development only by one or two conversations. That is because North Korea is not showing any indication of changing their prior position on the conditions they had proposed, such as efforts to resolve historical issues, before engaging in an earnest conversation on the abduction issue. Thus, there is a huge likelihood that the two countries will make efforts to approach their opinions by continuing discussions and going back and forth several times. (ellipsis)’ (May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2013, Hankyoreh Daily Newspaper)

In addition, the ‘Jiji Press’ of Japan reported as follows on May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2013 regarding Iijima's visit to North Korea.

‘The Abe administration started to focus on conversations in the North Korea policy. That is because the administration determined that it would be difficult to find a lead to resolving the abduction issue by maintaining the previous attitude of focusing on pressure, while putting up the strategy of conversation and pressure. However, the two countries of South Korea and the United States maintain a position that conversations will only be available under a premise of denuclearization. The distrust by South Korea and the United States, which was formed by Iijima Asao's visit to North Korea, who is the advisor of the cabinet, will amplify if Japan is the only country actively making efforts to engage in conversations. “Regrettably, other countries will not

autonomously resolve the abduction issue. There is a possibility that the other countries will have the perception that the North Korea issue has overall concluded if the nuclear missile issue has progressed.” Japan’s prime minister, Abe Shinzo emphasized the necessity for Japan to independently face the abduction issue at the Upper House Settlement Committee on May 20<sup>th</sup>. (ellipsis) Prime Minister Abe, who practically led Iijima’s North Korea visit, stated to the press corps on (May) 19<sup>th</sup> that, “We will engage in conversations and negotiations with the determination to resolve the abduction issue, no matter what.” However, South Korea and the United States may add their dissatisfaction to such attitude taken by the Abe administration. Davis, the special delegate for North Korea policy of the United States, stated to the press corps on the 18<sup>th</sup>, on his visit to Japan, that, “We understand that North Korea is taking a strategy of attempting division by understanding the difference positions of each country,” and expressed concern on the surprise act by Japan. “Diplomacy is undertaken to procure each nation’s interests. It cannot always be undertaken collectively. We should not be dissatisfied with each other.” This is what Prime Minister Abe emphasized at the Upper House Settlement Committee on the 20<sup>th</sup>, however, the opposition party hammered such by stating, “The abduction issue will not be able to be resolved if Japan does not maintain ties with South Korea and the United States.”

Japan had its objective to establish diplomatic relations with North Korea when former Prime Minister Koizumi visited North Korea in 2002, however, the line of ‘abduction issue settlement first, and establishment of diplomatic relationship with North Korea afterwards’ was selected domestically due to the unexpected severity of the abduction issue, and the policy line basically did not change until 2012. In the meanwhile, the nuclear development and missile development by North Korea continued to progress, and Japan’s hardline policy towards North Korea resulted to have the opposite effect, thus, Abe Shinzo himself accepted a change in policy in order to develop the relationship between North Korea and Japan more advantageously towards Japan.

### **Return to the ‘Conversation and Pressure’ Policy Line**

Abe Shinzo, who seized power again in December 2012, started to consider a direction to form a diplomatic relationship between North Korea and Japan before resolving the abduction issue if possible, while basically adhering to the policy line of resolving the abduction issue while concurrently resolving the traditional North Korea nuclear issue. This position was shown during Iijima’s visit to North Korea in May 2013, which explains the recent rapid approach in the North Korean and Japanese relationship.

Even so, Japan will probably not excessively soften their pressure towards North Korea. The background of Japan in making efforts to possess a collective self-defense right includes the intent to pressure North Korea. Thus, that is because the premise of Japan’s exercising of its collective right to

self-defense is that, 'Japan must be able to aid the United States, if the United States is attacked by a third country in the East Sea,' which is based on the hypothetical of assuming North Korea as the enemy. It can be concluded that the Japanese government returned to the North Korea policy line of 'conversation and pressure' as mentioned by former Prime Minister Koizumi in 2002, by deviating from the hardcore hardline policy towards North Korea.

### **Mutual Agreement between North Korea and Japan**

Afterwards, North Korea and Japan continued closed-door meetings in third party countries, in particular, China. And as a first result of the meetings, North Korea and Japan announced the following agreed matters in a joint statement form on May 29, 2014. The key points are as follows.

- (1) North Korea and Japan shall form trust between the nations based on normalization of diplomatic relations.
- (2) If North Korea commences investigation by forming a 'special investigatory commission' to conduct comprehensive research on the Japanese within North Korea, the Japanese government shall gradually lift measures, such as the restriction on personnel visiting between North Korea and Japan, restrictions on transfer and export amount regarding North Korea, and prohibition on entry to Japan by North Korean ships with humanitarian objectives.
- (3) Both parties shall take adequate measures regarding the graves and remains of Japanese people within North Korea and devise necessary measures for visiting to gravesites of family members.
- (4) North Korea shall take adequate measures by continuing investigation on the missing Japanese people.
- (5) The status of North Koreans in Japan will be discussed based on the 'North Korea-Japan Pyeongyang Declaration.'
- (6) The nations discussed on sharing data relating to missing people.
- (7) Humanitarian support to North Korea shall be implemented at an adequate time.

When viewing the basic positions of North Korea and Japan as above, it can be seen that the nations clarified not only to 'resolve the abduction issue,' but to 'normalize the diplomatic relationship between North Korea and Japan,' thus, to 'develop the establishment of diplomatic relations between North Korea and Japan.' In addition, it can be seen that the scope of agreement between North Korea and Japan reached not only the conventional issue of the abduction of Japanese people, but a comprehensive research on all Japanese people residing in North Korea, Japanese who died in North Korea, and the return of the remains of deceased Japanese.

Moreover, Japan agreed to lift restrictions towards North Korea independently, apart from the

restrictive measures over North Korea by the UN resolution, along with North Korea's progress in investigation, and also agreed on improving the status of North Koreans living in Japan.

### **Ulterior Motives of North Korea and Japan**

The above agreements are all acceptable by North Korea. It became easier for North Korea to express 'sincerity' towards Japan because Japan demanded for investigations on all Japanese within North Korea, and not only re-investigation on the abducted or missing people continuously demanded by Japan. As a consideration, the independent restrictions by Japan over North Korea will be lifted. North Korea will be able to alleviate its economic burden if the transmission issue from Jochongnyeon (pro-Pyeongyang federation of Korean residents in Japan) is substantially lifted. In addition, because Japan itself has an active attitude regarding the establishment of diplomatic relations between North Korea and Japan, there is a high possibility that the card suggested by Japan will mostly be amicable towards North Korea. There is concern that North Korea will take an advantageous position over South Korea and the United States if the relationship between North Korea and Japan is improved. Under such form of assessment, North Korea fully accepted the suggestions made by Japan.

Japan will be able to politically benefit by procuring a position to lead the North Korea policy, as it will become the first nation forming a diplomatic relationship with North Korea among the three nations of South Korea, the United States, and Japan, if they are able to achieve the establishment of diplomatic relationship with North Korea by forming a trust between the two nations and drawing out cooperation by North Korea regarding the abduction issue first through the appeasement policy towards North Korea. The United States emphasizes that the three nations must conform to the same pace, however, the Japanese government is calculating that the United States will support Japan once it is determined that the establishment of the diplomatic relationship between North Korea and Japan is helpful to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. In other words, the progress of establishing a diplomatic relationship between North Korea and Japan may become a diplomatic measure of pressuring South Korea for both North Korea and Japan.

South Korea will have to move more quickly than Japan in its North Korea policy by realizing the necessity of a new diplomatic strategy to adequately respond to the Japanese factor that will become a hindrance in South Korea's North Korea policy.

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