

# *AJISS-Commentary*

**The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies**

**IIPS**

Institute for International  
Policy Studies



The Japan Forum on  
International Relations

**JIA**

The Japan Institute of  
International Affairs  
(Secretariat)

**RIPS**

Research Institute for  
Peace and Security

Editor:

Akio Watanabe

Editorial Board:

Kenichi Ito  
Masashi Nishihara  
Seki Tomoda  
Taizo Yakushiji

Online Publisher:

Yukio Satoh  
President, JIIA

No.22. 25 January 2008

## **THE SIX PARTY TALKS STILL CRUCIAL TO JAPAN'S ABDUCTION ISSUE**

*Hideya Kurata*

The issue of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korean agents in the 1970s and 1980s is one of the main diplomatic concerns among the Japanese public. Given Pyongyang's untrustworthy attitude even after the head of state Kim Jong-Il admitted the abduction of thirteen Japanese citizens when Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visited in September 2002, the Japanese concern and anger is wholly

*The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.*

understandable. Yet, in the midst of this public concern and anger, are we not underestimating another serious problem involving North Korea, i.e., the threat of nuclear weapons? Progress in the Six Party Talks -- which seem to be suffering a setback due to Pyongyang's silence despite the passage of the December 31 deadline by which it was supposed to declare all its nuclear programs -- is necessary for Japan to keep open the channel of dialogue with North Korea, without which the resolution of the abduction issue will be very difficult.

Until the end of 2006, the Bush administration's handling of the Six Party Talks was a complete failure. The United States had obstinately stuck to its principle of demanding North Korea eliminate all of its nuclear weapons programs, including the highly enriched uranium program that sits at the heart of the current nuclear crisis, not just freeze the nuclear reactor that North Korea reactivated in 2003. As a result, the multilateral talks designed to denuclearize North Korea ironically allowed North Korea to buy time to accumulate weapons-grade plutonium without punishment. Punitive measures came only after the North Korean nuclear test in October 2006 when the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1718, which imposed economic sanctions on Pyongyang. In the resumed Six Party Talks following the nuclear test, however, the Bush administration reversed its North Korean policy. The February 2007 agreement, under which North Korea will shut down its main reactor at Yongbyon in return for aid and possible US removal of North Korea from its list of state sponsors of terrorism, was a clear sign that the United States shifted to an approach of engagement within the Six Party Talks framework.


Washington's turnaround has created a contradiction in approach between the UN Security Council and the regional Six Party Talks process. UN Resolution 1718 bans trade with North Korea having to do with weapons of mass destruction or luxury goods. On the other hand, the February agreement of the Six Party Talks acknowledged economic aid and regional diplomacy as most effective in nudging North Korea toward giving up its nuclear weapons. Thus the February agreement,

which would offer practical gains to North Korea, contradicted the sanctions-imposing Resolution 1718. The pledge of massive economic aid announced by South Korea during the North-South meeting last October is exacerbating this contradiction.

Japan is embracing this contradiction in its policy toward North Korea. Japan is the only country among North Korea's counterparts in the Six Party Talks that is imposing sanctions on its own terms. Under the February agreement, however, it is expected to improve relations with North Korea by providing aid. Japanese public opinion prefers the hard-line stance, believing that continued economic sanctions and the American designation of North Korea as a state sponsor of terrorism constitute important "sticks" necessary to resolve the abduction issue.

We need to remind ourselves that ours is the country facing the greatest nuclear and missile threat from North Korea. According to the February agreement, Pyongyang must declare all its nuclear activities and disable its nuclear facilities before being removed from the American list of terrorist-supporting countries. We could have abandoned the Six Party Talks altogether when Pyongyang brazenly conducted its nuclear test in October 2006. Yet such abandonment may have encouraged the country to test another bomb. To be sure, the Six Party Talks do not guarantee the complete denuclearization of North Korea. Nevertheless, so long as there is no effective alternative, Japan must act as a responsible member of the multilateral diplomatic channel.

This does not suggest we should ignore the abduction issue. Both the nuclear and abduction issues need to be addressed, even though it is not necessary that the two issues be resolved at the same time through the same diplomatic channel. Without progress in the Six Party Talks, Tokyo and Pyongyang will hardly have the chance to sit down together to achieve a breakthrough in the abduction issue. Japan's influence is limited within the Six Party Talks. Be that as it may, Japan must understand the paradox that robust multilateral talks alone can

keep alive the bilateral negotiations with North Korea in which Japan can have its own say in resolving the thorny abduction issue. 

*Hideya Kurata is Professor of Security at Kyorin University and Senior Adjunct Fellow at the Japan Institute of International Affairs.*