

Multilayered Confrontation in East Asia: The North Korea-Japan Conflict

By Tim Beal

After taking a Masters and a PhD in Chinese at Edinburgh and studying Japanese at Sheffield, Tim Beal has taught on subjects ranging from Chinese politics to international marketing at universities in Britain, Japan, China, South Korea and New Zealand, where he has lived since 1987. He has published extensively on various aspects of the Asia-Pacific region. His latest book, *North Korea: the Struggle against American Power* is due for publication in the autumn of 2005. Further information is available from <http://www.vuw.ac.nz/~caplabtb/beal.html>
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Introduction

The Pyongyang Declaration of 18 September 2002 following the historic meeting between Kim Jong Il, Chairman of the National Defense Commission of the DPRK, and Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro seemed to solve the abductions issue and set the two countries on the road to normalisation of relations.¹ In fact, relations deteriorated very rapidly and today are at their lowest for many years. The usual explanation for this, in which all the blame is laid upon the Koreans, lacks plausibility. This paper offers another explanation in which Japanese domestic politics combined with US policy in East Asia offer a more satisfactory framework in which to view this sorry affair.²

Unknowns, known or unknown

It will be recalled that US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was ridiculed, in this case rather unfairly, when he tried to elucidate the importance of unknowns:

Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns - the ones we don't know we don't know.³

The two central unknowns addressed in this paper are:

1 Why did North Korean agents abduct about a dozen Japanese in the 1970s and 1980s to 'teach Japanese language and culture, for its covert operations and subversive activities', when there was a large reservoir of pro-North Koreans in Japan, as well as a substantial number repatriated to Korea in the postwar period?⁴

2 Why was the abduction issue not settled by the Pyongyang Summit of 17 September when, according to Japanese reports, North Korean leader Kim Jong Il

admitted the abductions, apologised for them and agreed with Prime Minister Koizumi on procedures for the return of the surviving abductees?

The first unknown is briefly addressed without advancing any explanations, being left on the table as a mystery seeking a solution.

Abductions themselves are by no means uncommon. The Israelis are quite famous for it, with the abductees ranging from the war criminal Adolf Eichmann in Buenos Aires in 1960 to the nuclear whistle-blower Mordechai Vanunu in Rome in 1986. According to the *Washington Post*, the CIA has a global programme of kidnapping 'terrorism suspects'.⁵ South Korea has had some very high profile cases. The composer Yun Isang was abducted by South Korea agents in Berlin in 1967 and put on trial in Seoul on charges of visiting North Korea. He was sentenced to life imprisonment but released in 1969 after international protests. He returned to Germany where he became a German citizen.⁶ Kim Hyung-wook, the head of the Korean CIA who had fallen out with Park Chung-hee was reportedly kidnapped in Paris in 1979 and brought back to Seoul for execution.⁷ Undoubtedly the most famous South Korean case was that of Kim Dae-jung, then an opposition leader, who was kidnapped by Park's agents in Tokyo in August 1973. It was alleged that they planned to dump him at sea, but that he was saved by American intervention.⁸

What all these have in common, and what distinguishes them from the North Korea case, is that whatever the ethical issues, they all made political sense, although they might not have been wise. If North Korea had kidnapped scientists, or political dissidents, that would have been one thing. But why Yokota Megumi? According to Niigata Prefectural Police,

On the evening of November 15, 1977, a 13-year-old secondary school girl, Ms. YOKOTA Megumi, disappeared somewhere hundreds of meters away from the seashore, after parting from one of her friends on her way home from school in Niigata City. She has not yet been found since then.⁹

According to the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs she, and the other abductees, were kidnapped for a number of possible reasons, none of which appear to make sense:

Possible motives for this unprecedented act of state sponsored crime by North Korea are thought to be as follows: identity theft for North Korean agents; coercing victims into teaching North Korean agents to act as Japanese; and recruitment by a Japanese Red Army faction who are still harbored in North Korea.¹⁰

'State sponsored' abductions are far from unprecedented in Northeast Asia as Koreans, North and South, point out. A DPRK Foreign Ministry statement of 29 January 2005 reiterated the charge:

Japan had savagely plundered Korea of its resources for over 40 years after occupying it by force of arms early in the past 20th century. It took away or

abducted more than 8.4 million innocent Koreans and mercilessly killed at least one million of them and forced 200,000 women into sexual slavery for the imperial Japanese army.¹¹

Although the figures vary, these accusations strike resonance in South Korea where they are frequently repeated, either at times of confrontation or on anniversaries, such as that of the 1 March 1919 Independence Movement.¹² Nevertheless, linking them with the Japan abduction issue is relatively uncommon, in public at least. However, in his speech on 1 March 2005, President Roh Moo-hyun explicitly linked Japan's colonial-era atrocities to North Korea's kidnapping of ordinary Japanese in the 1970s and 1980s.

"In the same light, Japan should put itself in Korea's shoes and understand the anger of our people, who suffered thousand and tens of thousands of times as much pain over issues such as forced labor and comfort women."¹³

Roh himself added this section to a draft of his speech, according to the Japanese media. Some Japanese have also attempted to put the abductions into this wider context:

It is clear that the abduction of innocent citizens is a grave human rights violation. But is the denunciation of the abduction an expression of anger toward the infringement of human rights of Japanese compatriots or protest against the infringement of universal human rights? If it is the former, then it is nothing more than self-centered nationalism. If it is the latter, then the Japanese must pay due attention to the violation of human rights of Koreans in the past by Imperial Japan and try to solve the abduction issue while showing readiness to tackle the issue of compensation for Koreans who were taken for forced labor and the former "comfort women" who served the Imperial Japanese military.¹⁴

All this may explain why North Korea security agents might feel no compunction about kidnapping Japanese in general, but it does not explain the practical problem of why they kidnapped these particular ones, who seem to have no relevant skills or attributes.

The Pyongyang Summit – the solution that wasn't

Like anywhere else, within the Japanese elite there are contesting forces which argue, sometimes quite publicly, over foreign policy. In Japan's case, with the long-term dominance of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), this has traditionally been coloured by the existence of factions within an essentially one party system. In respect of North Korea, and general foreign policy stance, there seems to have been a fight around a vacillating or opportunist Koizumi, paralleling that in Washington between Powell and the neocons for the ear of Bush. However, in the Japanese case, the parameters of acceptable behaviour are set in Washington. In 1990, in a case with very strong parallels with Koizumi's Pyongyang Summit, a joint LDP-JSP (Japan Socialist Party) delegation led by LDP vice president Kanemaru Shin visited Pyongyang, had discussion with Kim Il Sung and came back advocating the normalisation of relations. That did not meet with American approval. As the Japanese scholar Shigemura Toshimitsu notes,

As far as the Korean Peninsula is concerned, Japan has no foreign policy of its own and simply follows Washington's lead, a subservience perhaps not confined to dealing with Pyongyang. ...//..

However, Japan's policy toward North Korea did not overstep the bounds drawn in Washington. The one exception was Kanemaru and his agreement, in a meeting with Chairman Kim Il Sung, on resuming diplomatic talks. Kanemaru did this without the knowledge, let alone prior consent, of the Bush [Senior] administration, and he came under heavy fire. U.S. officials warned the Foreign Ministry that resolution of the North Korean nuclear weapons issue would be difficult if Japan ignored the implications for nuclear proliferation and normalized relations with the DPRK.¹⁵

Talks of normalisation came to naught. The Koizumi-Kim Jong Il meeting of September 2002, and its aftermath, were in many respects an action replay of the Kanemaru delegation.

Currently, perhaps partly as a result of the Kanemaru affairs, engagement forces in the LDP are scarcely evident. According to the *Asahi Shimbun*, 'The LDP has been serving as bad cop to the government's good cop in dealings with North Korea.'¹⁶ The front-runner for the LDP on this issue has been Abe Shinzo, acting secretary general who back in 2002 was deputy chief cabinet secretary reportedly urged Koizumi to break off talks with Kim Jong Il after he admitted the abductions.

On the right, at least, there has been a continuity stretching back to militarism.

Moreover, the US released from Sugamo Prison many suspected war criminals, including political and business leaders, such as the right-wing godfathers, Sasagawa Ryoichi and Kodama Kiyoshi, as well as Kishi Nobusuke, who served as minister of commerce and industry during Tojo Hideki's militaristic administrations. Kishi, who became prime minister in 1957, was the grandfather of Abe Shinzou, acting LDP secretary general, who is known for his hardline stance against North Korea.¹⁷

In the opposite corner from Abe has been Tanaka Hitoshi, director general of the Asian-Oceanian Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who was responsible on the Japanese side for setting up the Pyongyang summit following overtures from the DPRK.¹⁸ The Japanese 'team' also included Chief Cabinet Secretary Fukuda Yasuo, Deputy Secretary Furukawa Tejiro, Foreign Minister Kawaguchi Yoriko, Vice-Minister Takeuchi and Hiramatsu Kenji of the Northeast Asia Bureau. According to Wada Haruki, 'secret preparations began from the fall of 2001 when Tanaka and Hiramatsu met with North Korean defense committee members and people close to Kim Jong Il'.¹⁹ This was a senior team and if they were reasonably united then it is difficult to see how their plans could be overturned within the Japanese political system alone. The explanation would seem to be that outside pressure, from the United States, was the key factor. Koizumi went to Pyongyang wanting, and presumably expecting, a resolution of the abductees issues. In return he was to promise serious movement towards normalisation of relations

and de facto reparations. In other words, the Japan-DPRK relationship would move to quite another level from the past, similar to that between Japan and the ROK. Underneath there might be antipathy on both sides, but there would be a normal state-to-state relationship and increasing economic interaction. This was a bold step, bolder than perhaps he realised, and it seems unlikely that he, and his team, would have gone to Pyongyang without assurances that they would have their way on the abductees issue. Indeed, Tanaka is reported to have said on his return from Pyongyang on 25 August 2002, where he had been making final preparations for Koizumi's visit, that, 'It had been agreed that the two leaders would strive to achieve normalization at the earliest possible date, settling once and for all the issues of the abducted Japanese, the nuclear program, and colonial period issues.'²⁰

That was certainly the assumption in much of the press. For instance, Doug Struck in the *Washington Post* on 31 August, just after the surprise announcement of the forthcoming summit, wrote:

The surprise summit on Sept. 17 between Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and the North Korean leader, Kim Jong Il, signals that assurances already have been given for some resolution to Japan's top concern: the fate of Japanese citizens allegedly kidnapped by North Korea during the 1970s and 1980s, according to government and private sources.

"We are aware of the risk of coming back empty-handed," said a chief Japanese government negotiator. ...

Japan and North Korea have never had formal relations, and Japan's diplomatic moves are usually slow and painstaking. The surprise of today's announcement was heightened by the fact that Koizumi has little background in foreign affairs and is typically more involved in domestic issues.

Korea watchers said that is an even stronger indication that a deal has been set, and that Koizumi's visit is to sign the agreement.²¹

In the event, Koizumi did not come back empty handed; he came back with what he went for, a resolution of the abductee issue.

The Japan-DPRK Pyongyang Declaration was circumspect and bland, as one might expect of something written by a joint committee of officials.²²

Item one committed both sides to moving ahead with normalisation – 'Both sides decided to exert all efforts to establish the diplomatic ties at an early date on the basis of the spirit and main principle laid down in the declaration and resume the negotiations on opening them within October 2002.' And in item two Japan apologised for the colonial period – 'The Japanese side honestly admitted the historical facts that it had inflicted huge damage and sufferings upon the Korean people during its past colonial rule over Korea and keenly reflected on and sincerely apologized for them'.

In respect of the abductions it said, in item three:

Both sides confirmed their will to observe international law and refrain from threatening mutual security. As regards the pending issue concerning the life and security of Japanese nationals the DPRK side declared that it would take a proper measure to prevent the recurrence of such regrettable things, a product of the abnormal relations between the DPRK and Japan.²³

There is no mention even of the word ‘abduction’ so whatever we know of Kim Jong Il’s admission and apology, and the information provided by North Korean officials, comes from Japanese officials. Information from North Korean sources has been very limited. In other words, there were no public surprises at the summit outside the control of the Japanese government.

Koizumi went to Pyongyang knowing in essence what to expect, and as far as can be ascertained got what he wanted. If anything, he got more than he expected. For one thing, the Japanese expected 11 abductees and the Koreans came up with information on 14 – four living, eight dead, one missing and one unaccounted for²⁴. More important, Kim’s apology was widely seen as an unprecedented concession (which indicates, as we shall see in a moment) how important the prospect of normalisation was for the DPRK):

But for Kim Jong Il to admit to such acts is utterly unprecedented in North Korean behavior. For more than 50 years, North Korean propaganda has maintained they are absolutely right and the entire rest of the world is wrong-not to mention being imperialists, war-mongers and criminals.

Whatever one thinks of this regime, it has always placed complete primacy on its own conceptions of national dignity as it pursues an extreme doctrine of national sovereignty. For the top leader to admit to these crimes is for his entire nation to lose face.

Kim, chairman of the North Korea National Defense Commission, was the only person in the country who could have made these admissions, but the fact that he accompanied them with a direct apology was truly amazing.²⁵

In fact, the DPRK has been rather more willing to sacrifice face for pragmatic reasons than Cumings suggests. For instance, in July 2002 Pyongyang expressed ‘regret’ for a naval clash in the West Sea in which a South Korean patrol boat was sunk; this was interpreted in Seoul, and the Western media as an apology and admission of guilt.²⁶ This was particularly significant since, according to some South Korean reports, the South was primarily to blame for the incident.²⁷

Koizumi is known for his mastery of internal politics, and it is commonly and reasonably assumed that Koizumi agreed to the summit primarily to bolster his domestic popularity. Did he miscalculate? This is a possibility.

The summit itself left the details of identifying the fate of the abductees and returning survivors and those of the families who so desired to Japan to be worked out in the normalisation negotiations. These were details to be tidied up, rather than unresolved issues.

The Japanese press secretary, Takashima Hatsuhsa, at a media conference on 20 September 2002, briefed journalists on this process:

Mr. Takashima: ..[the abductees] will be either visiting or coming back to Japan, or the members of the families will be seeing them in Pyongyang. I do not know when it will take place at this moment. But Mr. Kim Jong-Il promised to Prime Minister Koizumi that their reunion will be materialized, and the North Korean side will certainly assist with that. ../..

Mr. Ken Hijino, Financial Times: ../... Secondly, it was said that resolving the abduction issue was one of the biggest hurdles to normalizing relations. Has that issue been cleared, first of all, and what are the other hurdles to be cleared before Japan normalizes its ties? What are the coming conditions?

Mr. Takashima: First of all, the issue is not cleared, or resolved, simply because we need more information, and we have to clarify so many things. Therefore, this issue will be resolved during the course of negotiations for normalization. The hurdles: The things we have to clarify are how, when, and where, those abductions took place, and what happened with the victims. We and the members of the families wish to know all that information. We have to try very hard.²⁸

They might have to try very hard, and clearly finding out exactly what security agencies had been up to a decade and more ago would be difficult in any country. It might be especially difficult in this case with the abductions seeming to be so hare-brained and turning out to be a source of embarrassment to the leadership. Nevertheless, there was no indication at this press conference that problems so serious as to derail the normalisation process completely would surface.

Was Koizumi surprised by the vehemence of pro-abductee groups, and the media, to fan public sentiment so that what had seemed to be his solving of the abductee issue turned out to be an albatross? Again this is possible; even adroit politicians such as Koizumi may misjudge popular feeling. However, it is usually argued that he had not anticipated North Korean 'stonewalling and deception'.

Stonewalling and deception

The official Japanese line, and the one disseminated in the Japanese and most international media, is that the failure to resolve the abductee issue in the two and a half years since the 17 September summit, and despite a second trip to Pyongyang by Prime Minister Koizumi in May 2004, was due to Pyongyang's obstruction and cheating.²⁹ This is a complex story involving a web of living (and dead) abductees and their families and increasing bad feeling on both sides. As agreed, the survivors were allowed to return to

Japan in late 2002 by Pyongyang on the understanding that they would return to consult their families in North Korea on where they wanted to live but then were barred by the Japanese government from returning.³⁰ Of particular interest to the US media, and military, was Charles Robert Jenkins.³¹ He was an American soldier who had defected to North Korea in the 1960s and who had married one of the Japanese abductees, Soga Hitomi; they were both working as language teachers.³² Jenkins was released to Indonesia, which has no extradition treaty with the US, but then went on to Japan with his wife. There he surrendered to the US military, was court martialed, given a token 30 day sentence, and ‘debriefed’.³³

However, the issue which captured most attention and which seemed best to encapsulate the convoluted course of the post-summit relationship was that of Yokota Megumi. It was reported that she had committed suicide, after suffering a nervous breakdown. This was initially reported as having happened in 1993, but subsequently amended to 1994.³⁴ She left a daughter whose identity was confirmed by DNA tests.³⁵ She was buried but her husband, Kim Chol Jun, subsequently had her remains cremated, and it was these ashes which ostensibly were brought back to Japan by a Japanese delegation on 15 November 2004. It was symptomatic of the prevailing state of distrust that the authorities immediately embarked on attempts to verify the remains, although, as an article in the *Japan Times* warned, DNA tests might be difficult because they were in poor condition, there was only a small amount, and cremation, if at a sufficiently high temperature, would have destroyed the DNA. However, the paper added, ‘The police plan to use other technologies in their attempt to establish the identity of the remains, but the efforts are expected to take some time.’³⁶

On 8 December the Japanese government announced that the remains were not those of Yokota Megumi but of two other, unidentified, people.³⁷ There was an immediate public outcry at this fresh evidence of Pyongyang’s perfidy. Yokota’s father, Shigeru, took this as an indication that his daughter was still alive, and called on the government to impose sanctions.³⁸ These would include banning remittances from Koreans in Japan, and stopping North Korean ships from entering Japanese ports.³⁹ Foreign Minister Machimura said that Japan would suspend food aid to North Korea. It was reported that surveys showed that 70% of the Japanese people supported sanctions.⁴⁰

Pyongyang’s response was angry, but nuanced. It denounced ‘ultra-right forces’ in Japan, mentioning Abe Shinzou by name, but refrained from criticising either Koizumi or the Japanese government as such. The DPRK Foreign Ministry, in a lengthy statement on 14 December, laid stress on the role of Yokota’s Korean husband, Kim Chol Jun,

As far as the remains of Megumi Yokota are concerned, her husband directly handed them to the head of the delegation of the Japanese government, which came to Pyongyang for the DPRK-Japan inter-governmental working contact held in November last, *free from the interference from the third party* at the repeated earnest request of the Japanese side.

It is unimaginable that her husband handed the remains of other person to the Japanese side, as claimed by it, then what did he expect from doing so?

The “results of the examination” announced by Japan, in the final analysis, make us suspect that they were cooked up according to the political script carefully prearranged to serve a particular purpose [emphasis added] .⁴¹

Motive is a vital aspect of this business and if it was a purely personal affair, it was a good argument, but then the Japanese had their doubts that Kim was, in fact, Yokota’s husband.⁴² There seems to have been little disagreement in Japan that the tests proved that the Koreans were deliberately withholding information and there were no suspicions that the results were ‘cooked up’ by the ultra right. Even Gregory Clark who frequently castigated the Japanese right took the tests as indication that Yokota was still alive and that ‘she cannot be released now for fear of jeopardizing spy operations.’⁴³ The DPRK Foreign Ministry statement reiterated the accusations against Japanese colonialism, that ‘Japan abducted at least 8.4 million Koreans, massacred more than one million others and violated the chastity of 200,000 Korean women in the past but it has not yet made and moral and material compensation for these crimes.’⁴⁴ It also repeated the charge, to which we will return, that the Japanese ultra right was being manipulated by the Bush administration in order to ‘maintain its permanent supremacy in the region on the basis of the US-Japan alliance.’⁴⁵

The DPRK returned to the offensive in January, armed with the Japanese results, attacking their scientific validity. On 24 January the official Korean Central News Agency (KNCA) issued a detailed criticism of the testing process. It pointed out that tests were done by two institutions, the Police Science Institute and by Teikyo College. The Police Science Institute, despite having a long history and rich experience’ in forensic examination, and having ‘the world’s latest equipment’ failed to achieve any DNA results. It was the Teikyo tests which formed the basis of Tokyo’s claim that the remains were not those of Yokota, and the KCNA itemised a number of reasons why the Teikyo results were suspect and concluded that,

Japan has refused to recognize that the issue of abduction has already been settled, faking up even the results of the examination of the remains and totally negated the sincere efforts made by the DPRK, driving the bilateral relations to the worse phase of confrontation.⁴⁶

These were familiar accusations and cut little ice in Japan. However, Pyongyang then received some endorsement from an unlikely quarter. The British science journal *Nature* ran a story on the tests and concluded ‘Cremated remains fail to prove fate of Japanese girl abducted in 1977’ . It reported that ‘Teikyo University’ Tomio Yoshii, one of Japan’s leading forensic scientists’ claimed that he had managed to extract DNA from all five of his samples, while the National Research Institute of Police Science had been unable to do so. It continued, ‘Nevertheless Yoshio, who had no previous experience with cremated specimens, admits that his tests are not conclusive and that it is possible the samples were contaminated.’⁴⁷

If the tests were, in fact, inconclusive why was the Japanese government so adamant that they had proved North Korea was deceptive, thus fanning the crisis to a new intensity?

The Nature article was picked up by KCNA, which exulted, rather over optimistically that;

The British science magazine Nature recently disclosed on its Internet site that the results of the DNA test of the remains of Japanese woman Megumi Yokota released by Japan were a sheer fabrication and lie. ... It [Japan] should face up to the reality, frankly open to the international community the truth behind their mean fabrication of the results of the DNA test and apologize to the Koreans for it.

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Actually, the Nature article itself said nothing about fabrication; it did not venture into politics but confined itself to science. Moreover, no one seems to have taken much notice; it would take more than one article, no matter how authoritative, to dislodge the official line unless there were political forces, such as an opposition party not committed to confrontation with North Korea, to force the issue. Although the article does not seem to have registered in the Japanese or Western media in general, it did cause enough discomfort that it appears that the Japanese government has been trying 'to close the file' on the issue of the remains.⁴⁹

However, deference to the Japanese government was lacking in South Korea, where anti-Japanese sentiment was much inflamed by the Tokto/Takeshima crisis. It is here, in Seoul, that we find an article by Ryu Jin in the mainstream English language daily, *Korea Times*, that tied the Japanese government stance over the Yokota Megumi affair, and the post-Pyongyang Declaration abductee issue with American construction of the nuclear crisis.

Referring to disclosures that the US had misled its allies over alleged North Korean nuclear exports to Libya (of which more below), Ryu Jin linked this to the Yokota affair:

The alleged cover-up, a reminder of the earlier dispute over its intelligence fiasco in the run-up to the Iraqi invasion, has raised suspicion here that the U.S. has joined hands with Japan to spread falsified information in order to topple the Kim Jong-Il regime in North Korea.

In the Japanese version of the alleged information cook-up, the Tokyo government condemned Pyongyang last December saying it concluded that the bone ashes sent from North Korea were not those of Megumi Yokota, who was abducted by the North's agents decades ago.

Much similar to the American case, which neo-conservatives apparently attempted to utilize for a harder line policy against the Communist North, Tokyo also tried to use its own conclusion to suggest punitive measures such as economic sanctions. ...

"North Korea might have a nuclear arms program based on highly enriched uranium (HEU) as the U.S. alleges and might have sent false bone ashes – either mistakenly or intentionally – as Japan claims," says Cheong Wook-sik, who heads the Civil Network for a Peaceful Korea, "But no scientific evidence has so far been provided to prove the allegations. This is another face of the international politics in Northeast Asia taking place between fallacy and truth."⁵⁰

But whilst the minutiae of Japan-North relations since the Pyongyang Summit may be inaccessible or unexplored (the second 'unknown'), the wider Six Party framework in which the relationship is played out is known in broad outline. Looking at this framework and the geopolitical policies and motivations of the states involved allows us to surmise what is happening, even if we are not in a position to pin down the details.

The Six Party states – policies and motivations

The forum known as the Six Party Talks was engineered by China as an attempt to reconcile the DPRK's desire for bilateral negotiations with the US with the latter's strategy of applying pressure directly and through the regional powers, so that North Korea could be forced to abandon its nuclear programme without step-by-step American concessions in the style of the Agreed Framework that Clinton had accepted. The first talks, held in Beijing in April 2003, involved only the DPRK, the United States and China as chair and host. Japan, Russia and ROK were brought into the next round in August of that year, bringing the number of participants to six. For reasons of space and time I will touch on this very complex and broad subject lightly, keeping references to the minimum. A fuller explication can be found in my essay 'Positions, Policies and Prospects: A View from outside the Six' and in my forthcoming book, 'North Korea: The Struggle against American Power'.⁵¹

DPRK

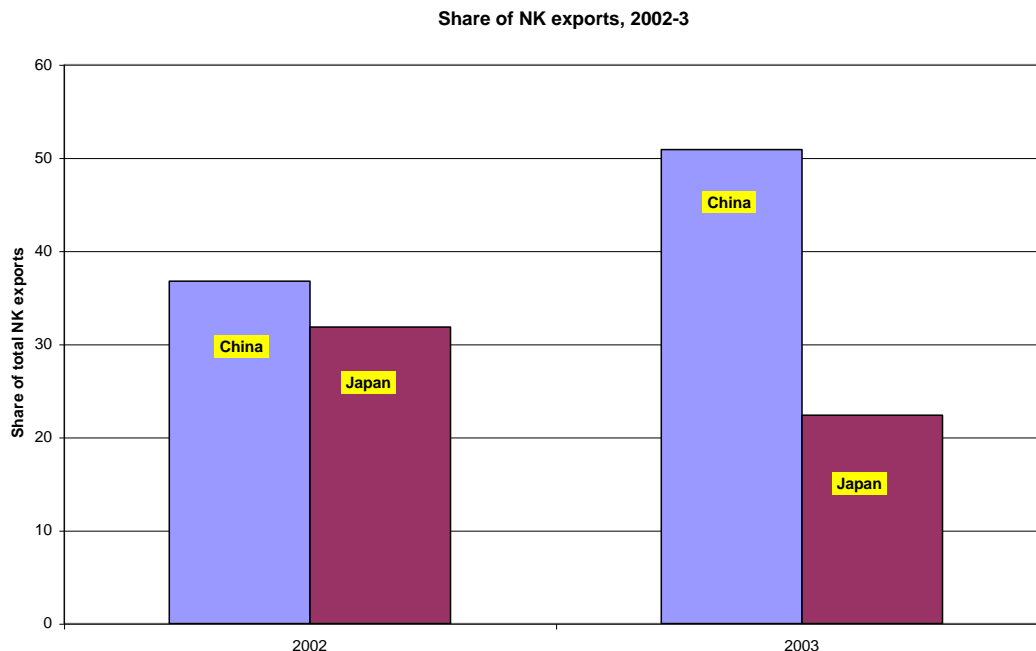
Whilst North Korea is widely portrayed as secretive and enigmatic, its broad strategic position is, in many ways, quite easy to describe. Supported by a favourable aid/trade relationship with the Soviet Union, able to exploit the Sino-Soviet rivalry, and led by the charismatic and energetic Kim Il Sung (the major figure in the struggle against Japanese colonialism), the DPRK had been one of the stars of the developing world. For decades its economic growth outstripped that of the ROK and it became the most industrialised state in Asia, second only to Japan. However, the internal rigidities of over-centralisation, and the continuing military threat and economic sanctions of the United States meant that its economy was not able to withstand the collapse of the Soviet Union and the 1990s saw it plummet into a deep and compounded economic crisis, which caused the deaths of some quarter of a million people. Although the economy has recovered somewhat the situation is still dire and North Korea remains heavily dependent on international aid to feed many of its people. Economic reforms, especially the marketisation measure of July 2002 have spurred growth but also increased inequality.

In these circumstances it is not surprising that the main foreign policy objectives of North Korea are removal of the US military threat and economic warfare (of which Japanese sanctions is a major component), and normalisation of relations with the US, and with Japan. These are the only two major countries, aside from France, with which the DPRK does not have diplomatic relations. Internal Korean North-South relations fall within a different category; though both are sovereign states, with seats in the UN, neither regard the other as a foreign state. The Pyongyang-Seoul relationship has its own dynamic, especially the shared commitment to re-unification, but is inseparable from US policy.

Since at least the 1960s Pyongyang has been making overtures to Washington and at times – the early years of Carter’s presidency and the final period of Clinton’s – an ending of ‘hostility’ seemed on the cards. The summit between Kim Jong Il and Koizumi Junichiro took place, as we know from Japanese sources, at Pyongyang’s initiative. However, asymmetry is at the heart of North Korea’s dilemma. Whilst good political and economic relations with Japan, and with the US, are absolutely vital and the key to economic recovery for North Korea, the relationship has no such importance for Japan, or for the US.

At the Pyongyang Summit of September 2002 Kim Jong Il was willing to sacrifice domestic face in return for the promise of normalisation of Tokyo-Pyongyang relations and all the benefits that might flow from that. Japanese de-facto reparations, if they matched those to South Korea in the 1960s, have been estimated to be worth \$8-10 billion, a very large sum for the North Korean economy. Japan had been North Korea’s major trading partner in the early 1990s, but Japanese sanctions and other measures had stifled trade. Just in the year after the Pyongyang Summit, instead of trade with Japan greatly increasing again, as North Korea had no doubt anticipated, it actually fell to \$174m from \$234m the previous year. Exports to China, on the other hand, continued to grow strongly and as a result the shares changed significantly. In 2002 China and Japan had each roughly one third of North Korea’s exports; by 2003 China had over a half and Japan’s share had fallen to less than a quarter.(Fig 1)

Fig 1: Japan and China in North Korea’s foreign trade, 2002-3



Source: see Table 1; Note that this excludes intra-Korean trade

Japan was also a major source of aid and remittances, both of which were stifled by the post-summit crisis.

Table 1: North Korean exports 2002-3, major partners and total

	2002		2003	
	\$m	%	\$m	%
China	270.7	36.8	395.3	50.9
Japan	234.4	31.8	173.8	22.4
Thailand	44.6	6.1	50.7	6.5
Total	736.2	100.0	777.0	100.0

Source: KOTRA⁵²

It is very difficult to suggest any reason why North Korea should violate the Pyongyang Declaration, as Japanese spokesmen have alleged.⁵³ It would have everything to lose and nothing to gain. That does not exclude miscalculations at the top and obstruction below, but it does make the suggestion that it is Pyongyang that has brought about the crisis very suspect. Japan, as we shall see, is another matter.

Russia

After a decade of neglect under Yeltsin, Korean affairs regained attention under Putin. Russia shares with China and South Korea a common desire for peace and defusing of tension in the region, the survival of the DPRK and its economic rehabilitation. The long-awaited linking of the Korean railway systems, which may take place this year, offers prospects of the Trans-Siberian Railway becoming a major conduit for the trade of Japan and South Korea to Europe. Although the most peripheral of the six party states, Russia has played a reasonably strong role in the talks. At the same time, Russia is becoming increasingly worried by US policy, and the threats of the US-Japan alliance and this has led to a warming of the Beijing-Moscow relationship. Significantly, for the first time in history, there are to be joint Russian-Chinese military exercises, and in the Yellow Sea region, facing US bases in Japan and South Korea.⁵⁴ The conservative Seoul daily *JoongAng Ilbo* noted that 'The military drill is a response to the strengthening of the US-Japan alliance' and drew the rather strange conclusion that Seoul should draw closer to Washington, ignoring the inconvenient fact that in the event of a military conflict what with America and Japan being on the one side and China and Russia on the other, the Korean peninsula would be caught in the crossfire.⁵⁵

China

China has been both the initiator and the host of the Six Party talks. One of the (presumably unforeseen) results of US refusal to negotiate with North Korea, has been to yield to China the role of the centrepiece of Asia/Pacific diplomacy.

China's position on Korea affairs parallels that of Russia. It fears that an escalation of tension would derail its surging economic growth. A nuclear-armed North Korea would

give encouragement, or excuse, for the nuclearization of an already remilitarising Japan. The collapse of the DPRK needs to be prevented because that could send a flood of refugees into China; it currently has about 50,000 - far more than the 6-8,000 in South Korea and the handful in the United States. On the other hand, while a rehabilitation of the DPRK economy would facilitate its burgeoning economic ties with South Korea and whilst the economic (and political) reunification of the peninsula under South Korean hegemony would have its drawbacks, they are minor compared with the status quo, collapse or, worst of all, war.

South Korea

The current administration of Roh Moo-hyun follows that of his predecessor (Kim Dae-jung) in North Korea policy, and this inevitably brings it into conflict with Washington. Kim Dae-jung recognised that a collapse of the DPRK, even a 'soft collapse' on the lines of German reunification, would impose huge, perhaps disastrous, economic and social costs on the ROK. His 'Sunshine Policy' was an attempt at defusing tension and economic cooperation as a way of leading to eventual measured and consensual reunification. Despite the Bush administration this policy has continued and this was symbolised in December 2004 by the first sales in Seoul of products made by a South Korea company in the Kaesong Industrial Complex. This economic zone in Kaesong, a North Korea city close to the border with the South, and quite close to Seoul, has been specifically designed for small South Korean Companies. The products, kitchenware labelled 'made in Kaesong' went on sale in the Lotte Department Store and were sold out in two days.⁵⁶ The venue has added symbolism since the Lotte group was founded by a Japanese-Korean. However, policy on North Korea (and hence relations with the United States) is very much contested territory. To some extent this follows party lines, with the ruling Uri Party leaning more to engagement with the North and attempting to assert independence from the United States. However, the leader of the opposition Grand National Party, Park Geun-hye, the daughter of the military dictator Park Chung-hee has also advocated engagement, called on the US to negotiate with North Korea and put herself forward as an emissary to the North.⁵⁷ At the same time there are strong conservative political forces opposed to engagement and there is the military, with a vested interest in confrontation and with strong ties to the United States. The commander of the US forces in Korea, currently General Leon LaPorte, is also commander of the South Korean military through the Combined Services Command (CSC). The CSC periodically has high-profile joint US-ROK military exercises to reinforce the perception of a 'threat from North Korea'.⁵⁸ The centrality of the role of the ROK military, and US dominance of it, was emphasised when US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited South Korea on her Asian tour in March 2005. She went straight to the underground command bunker where US commanders 'would direct any war against North Korea'.⁵⁹ Only the following day did she make a call on President Roh Moo-hyun. Marginalisation of political parties, and ROK political sovereignty, is a very real possibility.

At the Pyongyang Summit of 2002 Kim Jong Il was after what Park Chung-hee had achieved in 1965 – an apology for Japanese colonialism, normalisation of relations and reparations. Although Japan-ROK relations have improved over the years, especially

under Kim Dae-jung, there has always been a large reservoir of anti-Japanese feeling, and discontent with Park's treaty.⁶⁰ Despite the easing of barriers to Japanese culture in South Korea since 1998 and the success of the Korean soap star 'Yonsama' (Bae Yong-joon), and the 'Korean wave' in Japan, the scars of the past run deep.⁶¹ A recent example of this, on the intellectual level, was the furious reaction in South Korea to an article by former Korea University professor Hanh Sung-joe in the Japanese monthly *Seiron* which was seen as 'praising Japanese colonialism'.⁶² Visits to the Yasukuni shrine by Prime Minister Koizumi and the textbooks issue are a constant source of friction (as they are in the North, and in China).⁶³ Against this background, it is easy to see how incidents such as the present crisis of Tokto/Takeshima islands, precipitated by Shimane Prefecture's designation of 22 February as 'Takeshima Day' can quickly cause Seoul-Tokyo relations to plummet to new depths.⁶⁴ This crisis has echoes in the North, which shares the South's territorial claims (just as Beijing and Taiwan have identical positions on maritime boundaries in the Pacific).⁶⁵

Just as Seoul is trapped between Washington and Pyongyang, so also is it caught between Tokyo and Pyongyang. In recent months the ROK government has frequently called for Japan to desist from sanctions against North Korea, and if relations between Japan and South Korea continue to deteriorate, as seems likely, then this position may harden.⁶⁶

The United States

The US continues to tower over East Asian affairs, and the Japan-North Korean relationship cannot be understood in isolation from US policy. Moreover, US policy cannot be understood without recognising the centrality of its fear of the rise of China. US policy towards Japan, towards South Korea and crucially towards North Korea, revolves around China. North Korea is often used as a surrogate for China; for instance it provides the justification for missile defense which is really aimed at China. This concern with China, and obfuscation with the myth of the 'threat from North Korea' is echoed in Japan. As Chalmers Johnson notes in a recent and important paper, 'Japan may talk a lot about the dangers of North Korea, but the real object of its rearmament is China'.⁶⁷

A second aspect of contemporary US policy that should be noted is the drive by the Bush administration to unravel the foreign policy agreements of the Clinton administration, not least in Korea. That specifically meant the destruction of the Agreed Framework signed between Washington and Pyongyang in 1994. That had basically traded North Korea's suspension, and eventual decommissioning, of its nuclear programme – which was suspected of having produced some weapons-grade plutonium – for the construction of two light-water reactors (which would be less suitable for weapons), interim provision of heavy fuel, the lifting of sanctions and the move towards normalisation of relations. Richard Armitage, Deputy-Secretary of State for East Asia in the first George W. Bush administration thought he could have done better than the Agreed Framework, and it seems he set out to prove that.⁶⁸

There is naturally no consensus about the process by which the rapidly-improving relationship between Washington and Pyongyang in the final months of the Clinton

administration turned within two years under his successor to crisis, and the reactivation of the North Korean reactor. It will be recalled that Secretary Albright visited Pyongyang in October 2000 and brought an invitation for Clinton to visit and bury the enmity of the past.⁶⁹ Gore lost the election and Clinton did not go but he did leave George W. Bush a relationship with both Koreas that was on the cusp of a historic transformation. Peace was around the corner. And that may have been the problem.

According to a seminal paper by Jonathan Pollack in the (US) *Naval War College Review* no less, it was the Koizumi-Kim meeting in September 2002 that triggered the crisis.⁷⁰ Pollack sees two new factors that propelled the Bush Administration to send James Kelly to Pyongyang in October 2002. Firstly he thinks that US intelligence had new information about an heavily enriched uranium weapons programme in North Korea. Secondly,

Four weeks later, the stunning disclosure of Japanese prime minister Junichiro Koizumi's impending visit to Pyongyang triggered movement in U.S. policy. In the aftermath of the Japan – North Korea summit, the Bush administration confronted the prospect of abrupt and unanticipated changes in the Northeast Asian political and security environment. The United States believed that Pyongyang had defaulted on fundamental policy commitments to Washington, at the precise moment when the DPRK had opened the door to a new relationship with America's most important Asian ally and, prospectively, a major aid donor to the North. There was a real possibility that U.S. options on the peninsula would be driven increasingly by the policy agendas of others, perhaps enabling Pyongyang to achieve substantial breakthroughs at the expense of U.S. interests and without paying any price for its covert enrichment activities.⁷¹

Kelly came back from Pyongyang claiming that he had presented the North Koreans with evidence that they had a HEU programme, and that they had admitted it. Pyongyang soon denied both allegations, and has reiterated that frequently ever since, but this has seldom been reported in the Western press. Using the HEU admission as a justification, the US forced the suspension of heavy fuel oil deliveries, thus abrogating the Agreed Framework. With the Agreed Framework dead, Pyongyang announced that it was reactivating its reactors and in 2003, when the US still refused to negotiate, it said it would develop a nuclear deterrent. It made various statements about this deterrent programme over the following months and on 10 February 2005, following the 'exports to Libya' allegation and the Yokota Megumi remains affair, it announced that it had a nuclear deterrent and was suspending its participation in the Six Part talks until the US dropped its policy of hostility and agreed to peaceful coexistence.⁷²

Pollack was right about the danger a Japan-DPRK rapprochement would pose to US hegemony in East Asia but he seems to have given too much credence to intelligence claims about an HEU programme (defaulting 'on fundamental policy commitments to Washington'). He was writing at a time before US claims about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq were revealed as bogus.

Selig Harrison, a former Washington Post correspondent, one of America's foremost commentators on Korea, and the man responsible for Carter's historic visit in 1993, published an important essay on the issue in *Foreign Affairs* in January/February 2005 entitled 'Did North Korea cheat?' Firstly, Harrison brings South Korea into the picture, pointing out that the US was concerned about the warming of North-South relations as well as the Kim-Koizumi meeting. Secondly, he suggests that it was likely that the Koreans had an uranium enrichment programme for producing feedstock from their abundant supplies of natural uranium for the light water reactors promised under the Agreed Framework. Thirdly, he notes that the US has not produced any evidence to the other countries in the Six Party Talks that North Korea 'cheated' by having an HEU programme.⁷³

This last point has been corroborated by various sources. In particular China has made it clear that it does not accept the American allegations.⁷⁴

This pattern of disinformation was repeated in early 2005 when the US, in an effort to put pressure on the other members of the Six Party Talks, alleged that it had evidence that the DPRK had exported nuclear material to Libya. This, if true, could have been construed as a violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).⁷⁵ (But then, the American supplies for the British Trident programme could also be construed as a violation of the NPT). The American commentator John Feffer noted that 'Precipitating the latest crisis were headlines that North Korea had crossed the ultimate red line by supplying nuclear material to Libya'.⁷⁶ Feffer, and others, pointed out that whatever evidence there was pointed to Pakistan, rather than to Libya. This was an important difference because whilst Libya was a signatory of the NPT, Pakistan was not. Exports of nuclear material to Pakistan was therefore not a violation of the NPT. However, it was not until the *Washington Post* published an article by Dafna Linzer on 20 March 2005 that things turned sour for Washington. Linzer's article, which was headed, "US Misled allies about nuclear export", took the issue to another level.⁷⁷ It was one thing to have faulty intelligence, it was another thing to lie to your allies (*pace* John Profumo's denials in the House of Commons).

This was the article to which Ryu Jin was referring when he wrote in the *Korea Times*, as quoted above, 'U.S. has joined hands with Japan to spread falsified information in order to topple the Kim Jong-Il regime in North Korea'.⁷⁸

What is the explanation for US policy? Since coming into office the Bush administration has precipitated a crisis in East Asia, with North Korea, and has kept it on the boil ever since, injecting new allegations whenever necessary, and steadfastly refusing to negotiate a resolution.⁷⁹ There have been a number of earnest proposals for ending the crisis from individuals and groups, both American and international, but Washington has spurned them, as it has rejected calls from the South Korea government, from the opposition GNP party, and from the Chinese for it to negotiate. Many commentators argue that negotiations with North Korea are necessary, but would be difficult. On the contrary, negotiations would be relatively easy, but from the point of view of the Administration, and especially the neo-cons, would not be desirable. Leon Sigal, amongst others, has

pointed out that Pyongyang's demands are really very modest – 'North Korea isn't asking for much' .⁸⁰

Chalmers Johnson has noted:

Japanese officials also claim that the country feels threatened by North Korea's developing nuclear and missile programs, although they know that the North Korean stand-off could be resolved virtually overnight – if the Bush administration would cease trying to overthrow the Pyongyang regime and instead deliver on American trade promises (in return for North Korea's giving up its nuclear weapons program) .⁸¹

Actually, 'regime change' in Pyongyang is only part of Washington policy, and a minor part at that. It needs a North Korea that can be portrayed as threatening in order to advance more fundamental policy objectives, such as Missile Defense and the preservation of American hegemony in East Asia. 'Regime change', whilst satisfying imperial instincts would really be as damaging to imperial policy as a peaceful resolution, because it would remove that perceived threat. And there would be the danger 'regime change' in North Korea might be followed by an 'Iraqi-style quagmire'.

Chalmers Johnson raises the real issue – China. American policy towards North Korea is really aimed at China, and the 'renewed US-Japan alliance' based on hostility to China is becoming the key component of the policy of countering the rise of China.⁸² Ezra Vogel has recently urged the Bush administration to ameliorate tensions between Japan and China which he claims 'are more dangerous than Washington realizes'.⁸³ However, Vogel misses the point; Sino-Japanese tensions are rising not because of Washington's inattention, but because that is consistent with, and an inevitable outcome of, US policy.

The North Korea issue is a bit of a red herring. US policy, especially under Condoleezza Rice, is becoming increasingly confrontational towards China. Washington is encouraging domestic political forces that want Japan to become a 'normal country', free of the constraints of the Peace Constitution, especially clause nine, support for Japan's bid for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council being part of the bait.⁸⁴ The 'North Korean threat' aids the process of remilitarisation but it is increasingly being elided with the China threat'.⁸⁵ An important part of the new alliance is Taiwan, which is being brought under the 'security umbrella', thus introducing a fresh bone of contention with China, which has memories of the last time Japan took a strong interest in that island .⁸⁶ Perhaps in reaction to this move, opposition politicians Lien Chan (Nationalist Party, KMT) and James Soong (People First Party) hurriedly made historic visits to Beijing and Taiwan president Chen Shui-bian has muted his position on independence .

This US-Japan-Taiwan alliance is also leading to moves in Asia to build up an loose alliance around China .⁸⁷ Crucially, South Korea is moving towards this China-centred alliance, propelled by disagreements with the US and Japan over the North Korea issue, fears of Japanese remilitarisation, and the Tokto/Takeshima dispute .⁸⁸

That second unknown, the process by which the hopes and promises of the Pyongyang Declaration were dashed, remains unsolved. However, when we look at the broader geopolitical framework, we can see that the hapless surviving abductees and their families have become pawns in a larger game.

We are seeing a situation evolving in East Asia which has disturbing parallels with that in Europe on the eve of the First World War. If the alliances solidify into antagonistic tectonic plates then we may well face a cataclysm as they inevitably clash. Japan wrought catastrophe on itself in the 20th century by getting itself into a war with the United States that it could not win. It may repeat this in the 21st century with China. The Pyongyang Summit of September 2002 may have marked a crucial turning point in that process. By yielding to American and domestic pressure to walk away from the Pyongyang Declaration, Koizumi is leading Japan not merely into confrontation with North Korea but also with China, and perhaps South Korea. It is a path that ultimately may lead to disaster.

School of Marketing and International Business
Victoria University of Wellington
New Zealand
Tim.Beaal@vuw.ac.nz
<http://www.vuw.ac.nz/~cablaptb/dprk>

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Published as Beal, Tim. "Multilayered confrontation In East Asia: North Korea-Japan." *Asian Affairs* 36, no. 3 (November 2005): 339 - 60.