

ISSUE BRIEF

An Overview of North Korea – Japan Relations

Rachel Blomquist and Daniel Wertz
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Introduction

Japan and Korea share a history of exchange and conflict dating back nearly two millennia, and Japan's 1910-1945 period of colonial rule in Korea continues to cast a long shadow over its relationships on both halves of the Peninsula. Since the end of World War II and the division of Korea, relations between Japan and North Korea have been mostly defined by tension and distrust, punctuated by occasional periods of tentative engagement. The ethnic Korean community in Japan has played an important role in this relationship, with the pro-North Korean organization, Chongryon, acting as an unofficial North Korean embassy in Japan. Japan's current priorities regarding North Korea center around the issue of North Korea's past abductions of Japanese citizens, and concerns over North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. North Korea, which frequently issues strong criticisms of Japanese policies, has prioritized in various rounds of dialogue with Tokyo the normalization of relations between the two countries and receiving financial compensation for perceived historical injustices.

Historical Background

After the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, Japan assumed *de facto* control over Korea, formally annexing the Peninsula in 1910. As part of an effort to build an economically self-sufficient empire, Japan invested into Korea's industrialization, establishing most of the heavy industry in the northern half of the Peninsula.¹ Korea supplied Japan with industrial equipment such as steel, tools, machines and chemicals, as well as foodstuffs.² However, the benefits of this increasing economic productivity did not reach the majority of the Korean population.³

Japan implemented harsh and restrictive policies towards the Korean people throughout the colonial period, with policies of forcible assimilation hitting a peak as Japan expanded its empire during the 1930s and 40s. As Japan waged war throughout Asia and the Pacific, its government and military began to recruit Koreans (often coercively) to work at jobs left behind by Japanese conscripts, as well as Korean women to serve soldiers at military installations across its empire. Tokyo also sought to forcibly assimilate Koreans into Japanese culture by assigning Koreans Japanese names, promoting the exclusive use of the Japanese language, and banning the teaching of Korea's language and history.⁴

The circumstances surrounding Japanese colonial rule prompted various forms of Korean resistance, including a major series of protests for independence that began on March 1, 1919. Left-wing resistance groups formed during the 1930s among the ethnic Korean communities in Manchuria. One of these guerilla groups was led by Kim Il-sung, who was forced into exile in the Soviet Union in 1941 after a series of Japanese counterinsurgency campaigns.⁵

Immediately after Japan's defeat in World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union divided the Korean Peninsula at the 38th parallel, leading three years later to the establishment of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) led by Kim Il-sung in the north and the

Republic of Korea (ROK) led by Syngman Rhee in the south. War between the two Koreas broke out on June 25, 1950, as the North Korean People's Army invaded the South. The U.S., which led the Allied occupation of Japan from 1945 to 1952, used Japan as a major logistical base for its intervention in the Korean War; a contingent of Japanese sailors also conducted minesweeping operations in the waters around the North Korean coast.⁶

Chongryon and Japan-DPRK Relations

At the end of World War II, over two million Koreans were living in Japan. The majority returned to South Korea after the war; however, 600,000 Koreans remained in Japan.⁷ These "Zainichi Koreans" often experienced systematic discrimination in Japan, losing their Japanese nationality and facing barriers to formal employment.⁸ Those who identified as North Korean or sympathized with the DPRK established Chongryon – the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan – with the assistance of North Korea in 1955. Chongryon, also known as Chosen Soren in Japanese, has functioned as a network and advocacy organization for pro-DPRK Koreans in Japan, and has served as a portal for trade with North Korea; it has also acted as an unofficial North Korean Embassy in Tokyo.⁹ (A different organization, Mindan, supports ethnic Koreans residing in Japan that identify with the Republic of Korea; although most Korean residents of Japan supported Chongryon in the 1950s and 60s, the majority of Koreans who identify with either advocacy organization today identify with Mindan.)¹⁰

Between 1959 and 1984, the Chongryon facilitated the "repatriation" of more than 93,000 Korean residents in Japan to North Korea. (Most of these migrants were originally from the southern half of the Peninsula.)¹¹ Once in North Korea, the "returnees" frequently faced economic hardship, suspicion from security agencies, and limited ability to communicate with relatives back in Japan. Several thousand migrants were Japanese citizens – these included the Japanese spouses of ethnic Koreans, the children of ethnically-mixed unions, and ethnic Koreans who had gone through the lengthy process of obtaining citizenship.¹² Migration slowed as economic conditions worsened in North Korea, and as news about realities on the ground there filtered back to the Korean community in Japan.

Chongryon established a significant presence in Japan by creating an ethnic Korean enclave in Japanese society. The organization established and operated its own businesses, banks, schools, hospitals, and newspaper.¹³ Prior to restrictions being imposed in the 2000s, Chongryon operated commercial vessels transporting goods between Japan and North Korea with few restrictions or inspections, while also remitting earnings from Koreans in Japan to their families in North Korea.¹⁴ From 1992 until the imposition of sanctions in 2006, a large ferry and cargo ship, the *Mangyongbong-92*, sailed regularly between the Japanese city of Niigata and Wonsan, a city on North Korea's eastern coast.¹⁵ Chongryon also established a network of pachinko parlors in Japan, which allegedly served as a front for gambling and illicit activities.¹⁶

Credit unions associated with Chongryon, known as chogins, reportedly played a major role in raising and sending money to North Korea, making false loans or engaging in other fraudulent

practices in order to illegally remit funds. In the late 1990s, several of the loosely-regulated chogins went into bankruptcy, leading to their consolidation and a multi-billion dollar bailout of their depositors by the Japanese government. Japanese authorities subsequently cracked down on these financial institutions, putting their activities under greater scrutiny and arresting former executives for embezzlement.¹⁷

Diplomatic Outreach

During the Cold War era, the intense competition between the two Koreas for domestic and international legitimacy shaped Japan's relations with the Peninsula. Although Japan developed informal diplomatic and trade links with North Korea through organizations including the Chongryon and the Japan Socialist Party, it established diplomatic relations only with the South. Tokyo's 1965 agreement on normalization of relations with Seoul provided an \$800 million aid package and acknowledgement of the ROK as "the only lawful government in Korea." However, as the South Korean government adopted a policy of *Nordpolitick* in the late 1980s – seeking to improve relations with communist countries including North Korea – a door opened for Japan to discuss establishing formal ties with the DPRK.¹⁸

In 1990, a top Liberal Democratic Party official, Shin Kanemaru, traveled to Pyongyang to begin discussions on normalization of relations. Although the government of Japan retracted Kanemaru's initial offer to provide compensation for the division of Korea, this outreach continued through eight rounds of subsequent Foreign Ministry talks.¹⁹ By 1992, however, this process stalled due to the mounting North Korean nuclear crisis as well as the DPRK's unwillingness to address the abductions of Japanese citizens by North Korean agents.²⁰

Tokyo's relations with Pyongyang improved somewhat after the U.S. and DPRK signed the Agreed Framework on North Korea's nuclear program in 1994: Japan agreed to help finance the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) project resulting from the agreement, and also donated over 500,000 tons of food to the DPRK for famine relief in 1995-96.²¹ Several Japanese women who had moved to North Korea with their spouses as part of the Chongryon "repatriation" were also allowed by Pyongyang to return to Japan to visit their families during this period.²² However, after North Korea's launch of a two-stage Taepodong-1 missile in August 1998, which overflowed Japanese territory without prior warning, Japan issued sanctions on North Korea and temporarily froze its funding to KEDO.²³

Dialogue resumed in 2000, as Japan resumed food aid to North Korea and Pyongyang engaged in negotiations with Washington over its missile program. Over three rounds of talks, Japan intimated that it would be willing to offer the DPRK an economic assistance package, similar to that offered to the ROK in 1965, in lieu of reparations and upon normalization of relations. (The package would reportedly have been between \$5 and \$10 billion). However, disagreement over whether to refer to the funds as an 'economic assistance package' (Japan) or 'reparations/compensation' (North Korea), as well as continuing disputes over the abduction, nuclear, and missile issues, led to an impasse in negotiations.²⁴

Following a two-year hiatus in official talks, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi met Kim Jong-il in Pyongyang in September 2002 in the first meeting of the two countries' heads of state. These talks produced the "Japan-DPRK Pyongyang Declaration," under which North Korea agreed to extend the missile test moratorium that began in 1999, fulfill its commitments regarding its nuclear program, and continue to pursue bilateral negotiations toward normalization. In return, Koizumi apologized for the Japanese occupation of Korea and reiterated Japan's commitment to provide the North with economic assistance upon the normalization of relations. During this summit, in a radical shift from the North's previous stance, Kim Jong-il also acknowledged and apologized for the past abductions of Japanese citizens by North Korean agents.²⁵

The Abduction Issue

During the 1970s and 1980s, North Korea performed covert operations to kidnap Japanese citizens, conducting these operations for a variety of reasons. Until 2002, however, North Korea adamantly denied any involvement when confronted by Japan about the issue. Japan has officially identified 17 cases of abductions of its citizens by North Korean agents. While Japanese organizations involved with the issue have estimated that the total number is closer to 100, the precise figure is unknown.²⁶

In his statement at the 2002 summit with Prime Minister Koizumi, Kim Jong-il reportedly said that the issue "is regretful and I want to frankly apologize," and that those responsible for the kidnappings would be "sternly punished."²⁷ North Korea eventually admitted to the abduction of 13 victims, claiming that five were alive and eight had died from various natural causes or accidents. However, some of the reported deaths appeared to take place under suspicious circumstances, and could not be confirmed.²⁸ In addition, North Korea denied knowledge of any other abductees.²⁹

Kim Jong-il's acknowledgement of the abduction issue stoked public anger in Japan, giving prominence to victims' family members and to organizations calling for the return of the abductees. Megumi Yokota, a Japanese girl who had disappeared in 1977 at the age of 13, became a public symbol for the abductees' plight; North Korea's initial claims that she committed suicide in 1993 did not stand up to scrutiny, and her parents have expressed the belief that she may still be alive in North Korea.³⁰ Given the public outcry over the abduction issue, resolving it became a top political priority for Japanese leaders in their dealings with North Korea. Shinzo Abe, a member of Prime Minister Koizumi's Cabinet and his successor as Prime Minister, gained prominence through his public advocacy for the abductees.³¹

Shortly after the 2002 summit, North Korea allowed the five acknowledged living victims to travel to Japan with the understanding that Japan would send them back to North Korea. In order to guarantee this agreement, North Korea barred the victims' family members from traveling with them. However, after the victims' reunification with their families in Japan, the

Japanese government refused to return them to North Korea and also demanded repatriation for the victims' families still residing in North Korea.³²

In May 2004, Prime Minister Koizumi returned to North Korea in order to negotiate the release of the families of the abductees.³³ Following this visit, five children of returned abductees were allowed to leave North Korea for Japan. (Charles Jenkins, the husband of returned abductee Hitomi Soga who had lived in North Korea since his desertion from the U.S. military in 1965, was able to arrive in Japan with their two children after the family first reunited in Indonesia two months after Koizumi's visit.)³⁴ In November 2004, North Korea repatriated what it said were the remains of Megumi Yokota to Japan; however, subsequent DNA tests raised questions in Japan about the true identity of the remains, and about whether North Korea would be willing to settle remaining issues related to the abductions in good faith.³⁵ North Korea, on the other hand, subsequently described the abduction issue as "solved" and insisted that Japan take steps to normalize relations and provide compensation for the colonial era.³⁶

Japan and the Six-Party Talks

Not long after the first Koizumi-Kim summit was held in 2002, the U.S. accused North Korea of clandestinely developing a uranium enrichment program in violation of the Agreed Framework. KEDO subsequently halted energy shipments to North Korea. In response, North Korea declared the 1994 agreement nullified, withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and began to reprocess plutonium.³⁷ Six Party Talks to address the new nuclear crisis, involving the U.S., China, Russia, Japan, and the two Koreas, began in August 2003.³⁸ Japan sought to address the abduction issue as well as the nuclear issue through these talks, leading at times to tensions with other participants.³⁹

The first several years of the talks did not lead to any progress on the abduction issue, or to any concrete actions limiting North Korea's nuclear programs. After the DPRK tested a nuclear device on October 9, 2006, Japan imposed sanctions banning all North Korean imports and prohibiting the *Mangyongbong-92* ferry from entering the country.⁴⁰ (These unilateral sanctions went beyond the scope of those imposed by the United Nations Security Council following the nuclear test, or by subsequent Security Council resolutions related to North Korea.)

As the Six Party Talks process began to gain momentum in early 2007, the negotiators established a bilateral "Working Group on the Normalization of Japan-DPRK Relations" to address the abductions and the issue of Japanese reparations for colonial rule. In several meetings held through this forum, North Korea indicated a willingness to change its previous position that it had fully investigated and settled the abduction issue, but ultimately backed away from reaching a new agreement.⁴¹ As other Six Party Talks members began delivering heavy fuel oil to North Korea as part of the negotiation process, Japan expressed an unwillingness to contribute energy assistance until the abduction issue had been satisfactorily resolved.⁴² In October 2008, as part of an effort to revive the now-faltering talks, the U.S. agreed to remove Pyongyang from its list of State Sponsors of Terror; some Japanese officials and

family members of abductees strongly opposed the move, tying North Korea's support for terrorism with the abduction issue.⁴³

In 2009, North Korea's relations with Japan deteriorated significantly. With the Six Party Talks having faltered over the terms of a verification agreement, North Korea tested several ballistic missiles, including a three-stage Unha-2 space launch vehicle, followed by a second nuclear test. The Japanese government responded by extending its existing sanctions and adopting new measures, instituting a blanket ban on all exports to the DPRK.⁴⁴

Current Relations

Facing restrictions on contact and trade with North Korea, financial difficulties, and declining support among Zainichi Koreans, Chongryon has become a diminished force in recent years, with membership falling from 500,000 at the organization's peak to about 150,000 today.⁴⁵ By 2009, Chongryon had closed most of its credit unions and two-thirds of its schools, despite reported subsidies to these schools from the government of North Korea.⁴⁶ By June, 2012, a Japanese court ordered Chongryon to auction off its headquarters building in Tokyo in order to pay its outstanding debts; Chongryon lost ownership of its headquarters in 2015, although it has continued to lease space in the building.⁴⁷ In March 2015, Japanese police raided the home of Chongryon chairman Ho Jong Man on suspicion of illegally importing North Korean mushrooms into Japan, and later arrested four people, including Ho's son, in connection with the probe.⁴⁸

Relations between North Korea and Japan remained cold for the first two years after Kim Jong Un assumed power. Tokyo condemned North Korea's April 2012 satellite launch, timed to commemorate the 100th birthday of Kim Il Sung. In August 2012, the Japanese and DPRK Red Cross Societies met in China, nominally to discuss the repatriation of the remains of Japanese soldiers and personnel who died in Korea during World War II.⁴⁹ Japan suspended planned follow-up to these talks after a second North Korean satellite launch in December 2012. After North Korea's third nuclear test in February 2013, Japan further expanded its unilateral sanctions regime.⁵⁰ The following month, Japan co-sponsored with the EU a UN Human Rights Council resolution that established a Commission of Inquiry to investigate North Korean human rights abuses, including a provision requiring the Commission to look into North Korea's abductions of foreign nationals.⁵¹

Even with tensions high, however, periodic back-channel diplomacy between Tokyo and Pyongyang continued to take place, with Isao Iijima – a top advisor to Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe – meeting secretly with North Koreans in Pyongyang and China in May and October 2013.⁵² In March 2014, Japan-DPRK Red Cross talks on the repatriation of war remains resumed in China. Shortly after that round of talks, the parents of Megumi Yokota met with Megumi's daughter, Kim Eun-gyong, in Ulan Bator, Mongolia.⁵³

In May, Japan and North Korea resumed formal diplomatic talks in Stockholm, Sweden, with a follow-up meeting held in Beijing two months later.⁵⁴ Shortly after the second meeting, Pyongyang announced that it would reopen its investigations into the abductions cases, while Tokyo loosened sanctions by lifting some travel bans, relaxing restrictions on remittances, and allowing port calls by North Korean ships for “humanitarian” purposes.⁵⁵ Prime Minister Abe, who had focused heavily on the abduction issue earlier in his career, said that he would aim for a “complete resolution” of the abduction issue.⁵⁶

There was little initial progress in North Korea’s “reinvestigation” of the abduction issue, with an October 2014 Japanese Foreign Ministry delegation to Pyongyang achieving no new breakthroughs. Amidst this stalled process, Japan co-sponsored a UN General Assembly resolution condemning North Korea’s violations of human rights, which included language specifically about the abduction issue and encouraged the UN Security Council to consider referring North Korea to the International Criminal Court.⁵⁷ In response to the resolution, North Korea’s National Defence Commission stated that if Japan “continues behaving as now, it will disappear from the world map for good, not just remaining a near yet distant country.”⁵⁸

Relations currently are at a standstill, as Japan continues to wait for an abduction report, and North Korea articulates the need for Japan to apologize and pay reparations for its colonial actions before negotiations can move forward. During informal talks with North Korea in March 2015, Japan indicated that it would re-impose the sanctions that had been suspended if progress on the abduction issue was not made.⁵⁹ Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga subsequently announced a July 4 deadline for a North Korean report on the abduction issue, with other members of the Japanese government indicating willingness to both expand sanctions and to continue dialogue with North Korea after the deadline.⁶⁰ North Korea has linked further talks to Japan’s recent probe into illicit imports by the Chongryon leadership, warning that “under such situation it is hard to hold DPRK-Japanese inter-governmental dialogue.”⁶¹

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