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Political Change in 2010-2012 and Regional Cooperation Centered on the Korean Peninsula

Japanese Politics, the Korean Peninsula, and China

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↑he year 2011 closed with several symbolic events in predicting Japan's relations ▲ with the Korean peninsula. When President Lee Myung-bak held summit talks with Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko on December 17-18, contrary to some media anticipation in Japan, the meeting was dominated by the comfort women issue. Lee urged Noda "to have real courage in order to resolve the comfort women issue with high priority." All of the December 19th morning newspapers were filled with the comfort women issue, but then at noon, North Korean television broadcast announced the death of Kim Jong-il and the succession of Kim Jong-un. All television and newspaper coverage from the evening of December 19th became dominated by this news, brushing aside the tense meeting between Noda and Lee. As if to symbolize the critical role which China might play on this issue, at the December 5, 2011 Japan-China summit in Beijing, other than issues centered on bilateral relations, the North Korean issue alone appears to have dominated the foreign policy agenda. The power succession in North Korea and its implications for the security situation in Northeast Asia have deep repercussions for Japanese politics toward the peninsula.

This paper analyzes first the fundamentals of Japan's politics under Noda, then his basic foreign policy, particularly in regard to the major issue in the region, the rise of China. In the next sections it scrutinizes Noda's policies toward South and North Korea respectively, considering China's role in each relationship. A brief conclusion explores future leadership change and possible repercussions on foreign policy.

FUNDAMENTALS OF THE POLITICAL SITUATION UNDER PRIME MINISTER NODA

Noda's position has to be judged against the backdrop of the overall post World War II Japanese political situation. Japan's economic and political development was ensured under the reign of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which was formed in 1955. The "System of 55," as it was defined from this foundational year, put Japan's development in the hands of three cooperating forces: 1) the LDP, whose factional politics kept its leadership (except for a three-year interregnum from 1993 to 1996) stable; 2) an able bureaucracy, which functioned also as a set of think tanks; and 3) forward-looking and creative business leaders, who strengthened their production on a global scale. This allowed Japan to achieve its economic miracle in the 1960s, to overcome two oil crises in the 1970s, to astonish the world with its economic bubble of soaring land prices in the 1980s, and to establish Japan as an unmistakable economic giant, second only to the United States, at the end of the Cold War in 1989.

Japan's success story began to wane from the early 1990s, by the bursting of the economic bubble, the failure of political reform in the mid-nineties, and the weakening of the bureaucracy's authority through successive monetary scandals and indecisive foreign policy, which could not resolve any of the outstanding major issues from the legacy of the war. By the end of the 2000s the resulting incapacities resulted in three major social problems which were eroding the fundamental structure of Japanese society: 1) drastic change into the most aged

society in the world and failing social and economic policies to meet this change; 2) increased national debt due to continuous overspending in proportion to tax revenue; and 3) failed economic reform which satisfies neither the need for sound competitiveness nor the need for a stable social safety network. Japan was left adrift, having lost clarity about its national objectives.

In 2009, finally the System of 55 collapsed and the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) replaced the LDP. It first gave the impression that it aims for a very different society, domestically, with its slogan of "from concrete to human beings" backed by a policy of "encouraging births with special children's allowances" and in foreign policy, with plans for "creating more equal relations with the United States." Japan's development had been driven for decades by Tanaka Kakuei's policy of "Rebuilding the Japanese Archipelago," as declared in 1972. The gist of that policy was to expand the industrial success of the 1960s centered on the Tokyo-Nagoya-Osaka megalopolis to the rest of Japan, transforming Japan into a one-day economic and transportation zone, where Tokyo would play the central role. Discrepancies between cities and countryside, between the Pacific side and the Japan Sea side would vanish. This would be ensured by massive public investments to construct infrastructure all over Japan, including roads, railways and bullet trains, super highways, ports, dams, and massive apartments. Local cities rapidly began to change into mini-Tokyos.

"From concrete to human beings" implies a rejection of economic development led by massive public investment. Less public investment can decrease the national debt, more human-friendly policies can ensure the social safety network, more ecologically-friendly priorities can not only satisfy material welfare needs but also lead to spiritual happiness and contribute to a vision of society which values children and old people. These were the directions envisioned in the new government's development policy in December 2009.² But then Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio lost his footing in relations with the United States over relocating the Futenma base to Henoko in Okinawa, leading to his departure. Disregard of the bureaucracy is considered to have been a critical factor in the failures of the DPJ.

Prime Minister Kan Naoto inherited Hatoyama's policies with certain readjustments of election campaign slogans, for instance to ensure children's allowances of five trillion yen, which is an extraordinarily high sum in an overall budget of ninety-two trillion yen for the 2011 fiscal year budget. But then 3/11 happened, and Kan's cabinet grappled with the calamity caused by the tsunami and the Fukushima nuclear disaster. Kan had to leave office primarily because of leadership failure, i.e. the inability to establish drastic policies based on consensus in this crisis atmosphere.

Noda replaced Kan, increasingly making his policy objectives clear. First, Noda obviously had to overcome the aftermath of 3/11, tackling this issue with typical bureaucratic consensus building. This requires time, a phenomenon suitable in normal circumstances but not so adequate in an extraordinary situation. Established only on February 10, 2012, the Reconstruction Agency was immediately criticized as weak and incapable of transferring power from the existing ministries.³ A year after the catastrophe the fact that only 5% of the rubble had been cleared is indicative of the substantial obstacles still in the way of reconstruction.⁴ Second, Noda, who moved from the position of Minister of Finance, increasingly made clear that his major policy objective was to resolve two of Japan's most serious social and economic problems, i.e. the accumulating national debt, tantamount soon to 1,000 trillion yen,5 and the collapsing social security network in an era of drastically aging society through implementation of unified reform of the consumption tax and social security system. On February 17, 2012, Noda's cabinet adopted the Basic Plan of Unified Reform, elevating the current consumption tax of 5% to 8% in April 2014 and 10% in October 2015 and assigning the increased tax revenue to social security.⁶ The appointment of Katsuya Okada to the post of vice-prime minister on January 13, 2012 is understood to have reinforced the cabinet to implement this unified reform of tax and social security.

Third, to achieve these major objectives, Noda seemed to have renewed reliance on the bureaucracy, substantially pulling back from the slogan of "from concrete to human beings." The 2012 budget resumed the construction of large-scale public works such as suspended dams or bullet trains, a policy which could well be at odds with the goal of prioritizing the reduction in expenditures.⁷ In December 2011, Noda issued a strategic policy document, "The Basic Strategy of Japan's Reemergence: Overcoming the Crisis and Challenge to Frontiers."8 It outlines four major tasks: (1) reemerging from the nuclear disaster; (2) achieving both economic growth and reduced budgetary deficits; (3) strengthening Japan's capacity to reach economic and social frontiers; and (4) meeting the challenge of new global and regional frontiers as a long-term objective. Although some ideas developed by the DPJ are grouped under the third and fourth tasks, nowhere can we find clarity on what are meant to be the to be the main policy objectives.

THE RISE OF CHINA

If one chooses one issue of critical importance in today's East Asia, it is probably axiomatic to say that it is the issue of the "rise of China," combined with the countering policy advanced by the United States. Japan is trying to define its position between these two gigantic torrents. The phenomenon of China's rise began in 1978 under Deng Xiaoping's policy of "reform and opening." It took the very clear direction of opening the economy but preventing the dilution of the Communist Party's power, as shown in Tiananmen Square in 1989. After Deng's acceleration of the economic opening with his southern tour in 1992, the true impact of China's economic, political, and military rise began to be acutely felt from the second half of the 1990s. During the 1990s, Japan's China policy looked reasonably successful in establishing cooperative relations, symbolized by the relative "understanding" it showed in comparison to how the United States handled what had happened in Tiananmen. The Emperor's visit in 1992, the Murayama statement in 1995, the launching of ASEAN+3 (APT) in 1997, and the Japan-China-Korea trilateral dialogue in 1999 were all considered steps beneficial to bilateral relations. But Prime Minister Koizumi's yearly visit to the Yasukuni Shrine undermined the fundamental trust and leadership dialogue between the two countries in the first half of the 2000s. This was particularly regrettable in light of the "new thinking" regarding China's policies

toward Japan expressed by Chinese academics in the initial period after Hu Jintao assumed the post of General Secretary in November 2002. Upon the succession by Abe as prime minister in 2006, relations began to normalize through policy changes on both sides, and this basic trend continued during the tenures of the following three, short-lived LDP prime ministers.

From 2009, just at the time the DPJ assumed power and when both sides were still expressing support for tension-averting policy, tensions arose anyway as a result of China's growing naval power. While Northeast Asia was no exception, the South China Sea was in the forefront. At the July 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), for the first time there was open contention between China, on the one hand, and the major maritime ASEAN countries supported by the United States and Japan, on the other.9 At the following ARF meeting a year later the tension continued.10 In this environment the DPJ first strove to maintain a China-friendly policy. Hatoyama emphasized the notion of an East Asia Community, although it mirrored the theme of pan-Europeanism, the key concept that his grandfather Hatoyama Ichiro had advocated in the wake of World War II, and proved to be devoid of content.

After Kan took office, Japan's policy toward China was shattered by the collision of a Chinese fishing boat with a Japanese coast guard vessel on September 7, 2010. To those who saw an alarmist trend in China's access denial policy in the South China Sea, the incident had to be instigated by a militant group, possibly within the PLA, which succeeded in derailing an agreement on joint excavation of oil fields in the East China Sea, which had been scheduled for signing in a few days in Beijing.¹¹ Whether this interpretation is correct or not, initial statements by the Kan cabinet to "handle this issue in accordance with Japanese domestic law" gave the impression, or possibly supplied the pretext, on the Chinese side to conclude that his cabinet relinquished the wisdom shared from the time of Deng Xiaoping to "let the future generation resolve the issue." China's reaction became vehement, and Kan's cabinet had to release the captain, leaving an impression that the Japanese government backed away due to Chinese pressure.

Whatever the interpretation of that incident, Kan took one of the most important decisions of his tenure by adopting the new National Defense Program Guideline on December 17, 2010, which defined China's threat as follows:

China is steadily increasing its defense expenditures. China is widely and rapidly modernizing its military force, mainly its nuclear and missile force as well as navy and air force, and is strengthening its capability for extended-range power projection. In addition, China has been expanding and intensifying its maritime activities in the surrounding waters. These trends, together with insufficient transparency over China's military forces and its security policy, are of concern for the regional and global community.

This guideline introduced the notion of a dynamic defense force, strengthened the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) and redeployed more of the Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF) on the southern islands chain.¹²

Noda inherited this situation. The worst of the tension was over, the new defense policy had been established, and his primary mission became "not to rock the boat and to add as much positive momentum as possible." He had once expressed in 2005 his view that "Class A war criminals were not war criminals," but he immediately stopped expressing such views.¹³ In his visit to Beijing on December 25, 2011, Noda emphasized large-scale cooperation between the two countries and highlighted six initiatives as a comprehensive list of positive cooperation, which the two sides would eventually be able to advance. ¹⁴ Although those initiatives clearly look positive, at closer examination there does not seem to be any substantive agreement.

In order to understand the gist of the JDP policy toward China, a brief analysis is needed on its policy toward the United States and the current status of Japan-U.S. relations. The LDP's most successful foreign policy implemented after the Cold War was probably the one with the United States. Koizumi's unambiguous support of the U.S. position after 9/11 and his personal relationship with George Bush marked the high water mark of this policy, and the policy continued under his three successors. Hatoyama's drastic statements on relocating the Futenma base outside Japan or, at least outside Okinawa, shattered that foundation. Not only did Futenma become an impossible issue for all who cared about the relationship, but in conjuncture with his Asia friendly proclamation, it raised misgivings that Japan was shifting its cornerstone relationship from the United States toward China.

Kan, in a way, was fortunate to face the United States under the impact of 3/11, producing an atmosphere of extreme goodwill and massive U.S. assistance through Operation Tomodachi, which was truly appreciated across all layers of Japanese society. Noda inherited this positive atmosphere. Serious misgivings that Japan was turning from the United States to China had faded, partly due to the fishing boat collision of 2010. It was still necessary to do something about Futenma, and a first step may have been the announcement in February 2012 of the relocation of 4,700 marines first and the decoupling of the Futenma issue for the time being. 15 Another decision affecting the fundamentals of Japan-U.S. relations was taken on November 11, 2011 with the decision to enter into negotiations for joining the TPP. Although Noda's selection of two complete laymen, Ichikawa Yasuo and Tanaka Naoki, to serve as Minister of Defense surprised many, Noda has managed to keep U.S. relations on a rather even keel.

SOUTH KOREA

Japan-Korea Relations in Broad Perspective

There are strategic reasons why closer cooperation between Japan and Korea would be mutually beneficial. First, historically, Korea's rapid rise in its economic and political power and Japan's drift over the last twenty years resulted in leveling differences between the two countries, in particular in the economic arena. Professor Soeya Yoshihide's groundbreaking proposal of a middle-power configuration for Japan and Korea increasingly has resonance in Japan. Second, socially and culturally, the two countries began to share the same social problems such as aging, immigration, and gender equality. The two countries increasingly

also share a common cultural understanding and even admiration, as seen in the Korean wave in Japan. Third, geopolitically, the most important factor is that the two countries are juxtaposed with China. Though one of them faces it across a land frontier (separated by North Korea) as well as across the sea, and the other only across the sea, both are directly affected by "China's rise," and thus have a common agenda, which is reinforced by the fact that both have been spokes in the U.S. "hub and spoke" system since the the Cold War.

Positive and creative ideas for cooperation are actually numerous:

- (1) Overcoming poverty and insecurity for all individuals. Cooperation on ODA and human security could be a realistic objective. Overcoming global problems to achieve sustainable economic development, dealing with such matters as energy, the environment, global warming, and population issues is another area for cooperation.
- (2) Creating a regional economic structure. Both Korea and Japan could obtain common benefits, and address common problems, on the one hand, from the creation of an East Asian cooperative structure through ASEAN+3 or +6, or on the other hand, by joining in wider Asia Pacific cooperation through the TPP and APEC. Korea has put into effect the KORUS FTA, whereas Japan has started on the path of joining the TPP. Both are faced with the challenge of overcoming a maze of networking and creating the most effective regional economic structure. As interest has intensified in the CJK FTA, the importance of coordination is further demonstrated. Since both are energy poor but high energy consuming countries, why can they not cooperate in creating a more effective regional energy network? Both have vital interest to preserve and strengthen agriculture not only for the sake of maintaining some indigenous food supply but also for the sake of maintaining landscape and scenery. Why cannot they cooperate in this area?
- (3) Establishing a regional security architecture. Both are located in the shadow of a rising China, and both countries' security is dependent on the United States. The fundamental resemblance of their security conditions is startling. The Japan-Korea-U.S. triangular cooperation is one concrete step forward, but is that all?

Japan-Korea Relations in Historical Perspective

Despite complex issues related to history, which keep tormenting bilateral relations, the LDP managed to gradually remove some of the heat from these issues. Some credit should be given to the continuous efforts from both sides to overcome the rift, but at the same time, Korea's development into a rich, democratic, and culturally confident country was a large factor for closing the gap between the two countries. Particularly after it transformed into a country with a democratically elected civilian president (as of 1993) and reached the status of an advanced market economy (as was shown by its joining the OECD in 1996), this positive trend was enhanced. President Kim Dae-Jung's groundbreaking visit in 1998, the joint holding of the World Cup in 2002, the unprecedented attraction of Korean culture in Japan from 2003-04 were all positive phenomena, bringing the two countries closer.

The DPJ government inherited this positive trend and carried it forward. Kan's August 10, 2011 statement on the occasion of 100 years of Japan's annexation of Korea was generally perceived as hitting the right tone. The key passage reads as follows:16

As demonstrated by strong resistance such as the Samil independence movement, the Korean people of that time were deprived of their country and culture, and their ethnic pride was deeply scarred by the colonial rule which was imposed against their will under the political and military circumstances....To the tremendous damage and sufferings that this colonial rule caused, I express here once again my feelings of deep remorse and my heartfelt apology.

The Takeshima/Dokdo Territorial Problem Haunting the Relationship

And yet, past history still haunts the two countries. In recent years the territorial issue around Takeshima/Dokto, sometimes combined with the textbook issue in Japan, has become most critical. Particularly from March 2005, when the prefecture of Shimane announced its decision to make February 22 Takeshima Day and President Roh Moo-hyun declared "diplomatic war" against Japan, this issue has cast a shadow on relations, even during the period under President Lee Myung-bak from 2008.

For Koreans, this issue is more than a dispute over the ownership of islands, but a pivotal symbol of historical memory, pride, and identity. Takeshima became officially a part of Shimane Prefecture in 1905, five years before Japan formally annexed Korea. Koreans regard it as a precursor to the annexation; therefore, any defense by Japanese of Japan's ownership sounds as if justifying the Korean annexation itself and leads to an emotional outburst. In Japan the root cause of Korean emotionalism is little understood.

When any action in Japan on Takeshima results in an emotional explosion, the Japanese government finds it difficult to take meaningful action. Scholars and opinion leaders in the private sector might have a useful role to play by expressing divergent views, undertaking positivist surveys of historical records and engaging in genuine dialogue with Korean scholars to achieve mutual understanding.

The Japanese government's view on Takeshima has been explained on the MOFA home page, notably formulated in a pamphlet "Ten Issues of Takeshima" published in 2008.¹⁷ The scholar who most actively supports this official position recently is Shimojo Masao. 18 Aside from his popular writing, he has concentrated his recent activities at the Shimane Prefecture Research Institute. The first round of research of this prefectural institute was made from June 2005 to March 2007, and the second round of activity produced its interim report in February 2011.¹⁹

There has been a sizable number of scholars who have argued strongly against the official government view in Japan. Among them, Naito Seichu has recently been most active in criticizing Japan's official views, including bombarding "Ten Issues of Takeshima" with refutations. 20 But recently there has emerged in this debate scholars who may be identified as in between, trying to take "an objective stand"

based solely on positivist scholarship. Ikeuchi Satoshi of Nagoya University is one such scholar, and his publication opens a new perspective of historical recognition, resulting in an impression that neither Japan nor Korea was extending its actual control over the island at the time of its annexation in 1905. Following his writings in 2010 and 2011,²¹ a promising development in September 2011 was an open debate at a scholarly meeting in Korea without leading to an emotional outburst.²²

Another avenue for a peaceful settlement of this issue is to resort to confidence building measures, as discussed at the Takeshima/Dokdo conference in June 2009 held by SAIS in Washington D.C. and sponsored by the Northeast Asia History Foundation. Japan and Korea may learn from the rich experience that was accumulated in Japan-Russia negotiations to "consolidate the environment" of negotiations on sovereignty, such as no-visa exchanges or a fishery agreement.²³

The Comfort Women Issue Resurfacing

Also coming to the surface after several years of relative lull is the issue of comfort women. In August 2011, the Korean Constitutional Court judged that its government is not fulfilling its duty to protect the rights of former comfort women. After three months of quiet diplomacy, Lee Myung-bak went on a fullscale diplomatic offense during his Kyoto trip on December 17-18. Noda reportedly replied that while all issues of compensation were resolved by the 1965 bilateral agreement, there may be a way out from an humanitarian point of view.²⁴

Editorials in the major newspapers on the morning of December 19 were split in two: Yomiuri and Sankei covered the issue with strong criticism against the Korean approach, warning that Japan should not give in to Korean pressure. Asahi and Chunichi, followed by Mainichi, acknowledged that the issue is not resolved and that some kind of solution based on a humanitarian approach needs to be pursued. All wrote that the Korean side should not ignore what Japan had actually done: apologized for the pain Japan caused (Cabinet General Secretary Kono's statement in 1993), and apologized with compensation, which Japan showed a readiness to extend through the Asian Women's Fund, which worked from 1995 until 2007.²⁵

The debate on comfort women was swept away by news of the North Korean succession, but the comfort women issue is not gone. South Korea did not accept this scheme in 1995, arguing that Japan refused to take state responsibility. Indeed, the Japanese government took a legally cautious approach, insisting that because the 1965 agreement solved all legal compensation issues, actual compensatory money would be paid by the private sector. But after the Japanese Supreme Court ruled in April 2007 that, based on post-war treaty obligations, all claims made by individuals cannot be sustained, the Japanese government may not fear any more criminal indictments in Japanese courts. Moral resolution of this issue by establishing a new scheme for what the Asian Women's Fund had wanted to achieve in South Korea, using government expenditures, could become the ultimate solution to this difficult issue. This is the author's view, expressed in two recent articles,²⁶ to which there has not been a response. Judging from

press reports, Noda's position on this issue is mute, if not negative. In his March 1 statement, Lee Myung-bak urged Japan to resolve the comfort women issue, but the Japanese government spokesman just responded with a vague statement about "squeezing one's brain to find out what to do."27

NORTH KOREA

Continuous Efforts Toward Normalization After the End of the Cold War

To the end of the Cold War, relations between Japan and North Korea were simple. Until 1965, Japan's sole diplomatic objective on the peninsula was to establish relations with South Korea. When it succeeded, the Japanese government wanted to maintain practical relations with the North.²⁸ During the 1970s and 1980s moderate steps were taken in the economic and cultural spheres.²⁹ It was only after the end of the Cold War that serious efforts were made to establish political relations. Three occasions can be noted. The first opportunity was the period immediately following the end of the Cold War. Precisely when fundamental change began in the Soviet Union, Prime Minister Takeshita Noboru made Japan's first initiative-taking statement at the Diet on March 30, 1989. He expressed "deep remorse and regret to all people in this area" with the clear implication of addressing both South and North Korea and expressed his willingness to "improve relations" with the North. 30 In September 1990, just one week before Gorbachev recognized South Korea, Kanemaru Shin, who was known as the Godfather of the LDP (more precisely of its Takeshita faction), led a LDP-Japan Socialist Party (JSP) delegation to North Korea and met with Kim Il-sung. Based on their agreement negotiations for normalization took place over eight rounds from January 1991 to February 1992, without achieving any success.

The second opportunity arrived after the death of Kim Il-sung and after the Agreed Framework and the establishment of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO). In March 1995, a delegation led by Watanabe Michio, an influential LDP leader, visited North Korea and agreed that "there were not any preconditions to resuming the negotiations for normalization of the relationship." Some warming in the relationship was seen through Japan's food aid and the return home of Japanese-born spouses. After the positive international mood developed by North-South dialogue under Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy, three rounds of normalization negotiations took place from April to October 2000, but again to no avail.

The third opportunity produced a totally different result. Koizumi Junichiro visited North Korea and on September 17, 2002 issued the Pyongyang Declaration with Kim Jong-il. As a prerequisite of the agreement, Kim acknowledged the fact of abductions, apologized, and promised they would never happen, while conveying a list of thirteen abductees, of whom eight were allegedly dead. In the Declaration, an agreement was reached about the modality of establishing diplomatic relations, based on the South-Korean format of 1965 and Murayama's apology of 1995. A security working group was established to discuss all security related issues, including, "nuclear and missile issues" as prescribed in the Declaration.

Koizumi's success was due to several factors: North Korea's diplomatic initiatives to enhance dialogue with the outside, culminating in the North-South summit of June 2000 and the opening of diplomatic relations with Europe in 2001; U.S. rejection of North Korea through Bush labeling it one of the three "axis of evil" countries during his January 2002 State of the Union address; and Koizumi's shrewd diplomacy to cut into this vacuum and enter into completely confidential negotiations through his MOFA assistant Tanaka Hitoshi.

Fixation on Abductions and Complete Stalemate in Negotiations

Koizumi's Pyongyang visit was first hailed as an unforeseen diplomatic success, but soon relations became paralyzed. The first blow came from the U.S. announcement that North Korea had been enriching uranium even after the Agreed Framework of 1994. Continuation of normalization talks became much more difficult. But it was Japan's outrage at North Korean abductions that virtually ended Koizumi's overture, which had opened a very short-lived strategic opportunity for Japan to enter into the peninsula's power game. The news that eight abductees were allegedly dead aroused emotional indignation. The government decided on October 24 not to let five abductees, who had returned to Japan two weeks earlier, go back to North Korea. In turn, at the normalization talks at the end of October, North Korea suspended all of the commitments it had made in September. Public opinion rallied behind the families of abductees, eventually taking the form of the National Association for the Rescue of Japanese Kidnapped by North Korea (NARKN).³¹ Since then, Japan's policy toward North Korea has been dominated by its requests to resolve the abduction issue first.

The relationship became completely frozen. Koizumi succeeded in gaining back the children of the five returned abductees in 2004, and that became the only practical result from the fall of 2002. When the Six-Party Talks were established in August 2003, Japan managed to join, but it refused to contribute unless there was progress on the abductions issue. In February 2007 in response to the Joint Agreement Japan refused to join in supplying 50,000 tons of heavy oil in response to North Korea's shut down of the Yongbyon nuclear facility.

After the DPJ assumed power, as far as we can trace through media reports, responses continued to be monopolized by this abductions-first-approach. In the initial months after Hatoyama became prime minister, two channels were apparently opened with North Korea. One was a person close to Ozawa Ichiro, who once a month visited the North Korean embassy in Beijing. Another person close to the prime minister's office visited Beijing in mid-October 2009 and had a talk with a high-ranking North Korean official. In all these meetings in response to questions about the abductees, there was no clear response. Some information implied that "some are in not good health."32 Hatoyama stated on January 4, 2010, "If opportunity matures and there emerges real necessity I would visit the North, but unfortunately that timing has not arrived yet."33

A similar situation prevailed under Kan. The abduction issue attracted wide attention when the government invited Kim Hyeon-hui, the North Korean agent who blew up a South Korean airline in Iraq in 1987, with media fanfare from July 20-23, 2010. She had talks with families of abductees, stayed overnight in Hatoyama's summer house, had a helicopter tour over Tokyo and Mount Fuji and then went back to South Korea without tangible results. In the last months under Kan, reports suddenly appeared that Nakai Hiroshi, the minister in charge of abduction in the Hatoyama cabinet, had four meetings with Son Il-ho, North Korea's ambassador in charge of Japanese relations at the Six-Party Talks, somewhere in a third country during the spring of 2011. The last meeting reportedly took place on July 21 and 22 in Changchun. An official of the cabinet office in charge of abductions accompanied him. Nakai requested concrete steps forward on the abductions, but no progress was observed. The Kan government took the position that it does not acknowledge Nakai's visit.34 If the purpose of these contacts was just to ensure progress on the abductions issue from a domestic point of view, lacking any strategic thinking toward the Korean peninsula, then real progress in Japan-North Korea relations, including regarding the issue of abduction, can hardly be expected.

Noda Facing Kim Jong-un

The North Korean situation was put in a different light by the death of Kim Jongil and the succession of Kim Jong-un. What policy will the Japanese government take toward the new regime, and how will this affect Japan-South Korea relations are important questions about which several cautious comments are in order.

First, the government's initial response was reactive. The Cabinet Security Council immediately met on the announcement of Kim Jong-il's death, and it decided to strengthen the system of information gathering, sharing information with the United States, South Korea, China and others, and set the state system on alert so that Japan would be ready to respond to any eventuality.35 On December 21, Cabinet General Secretary Fujimura Osamu announced that the government is not going to extend condolences.³⁶ Koizumi only offered a wreath at the central office of Chosen-Soren (the National Federation of Pro-Pyongyang Korean Residents in Japan). North Korean television reported it, and Japanese television replayed the scene in the North Korean television broadcast.

Second, contrary to this seemingly detached reaction, a chorus from the abductees' families argued that under the new leader there might be a long-waited opportunity for a breakthrough, and, therefore, the Noda government should do everything possible to achieve concrete results. Yokota Sakie (mother of the symbol of the abductees, Yokota Megumi) desperately appealed to the government that "the situation in North Korea might change substantially by the dictator's death. Ten years have passed since Koizumi's visit. We consider that this may be the last opportunity to see our daughter."37 Gekkan Nihon carried an article expressing the collective voice of families, practically everyone urging Noda to do everything possible, and lizuka, the representative of the family association, stated at a national meeting "the Japanese government should do everything before the new system takes concrete shape. Whether through underground negotiations or official negotiations, with stern will it should be possible to move North Korea."38

Third, as if to respond to this drumbeat of appeals, on January 9-10, 2012, Nakai held another meeting with Son Il-ho in Northeast China, but this was followed by Fujimura, Cabinet General Secretary, dismissing the meeting as "a diplomatic activity of an individual parliamentarian.³⁹ On January 12 at the meeting between the heads of delegations of Japan and South Korea, the Japanese side described Nakai's meeting as "informal contacts outside the level of government to government contacts."40 Since relations between South and North Korea are tense, media reports in Japan began indicating South Korea's irritation: "in South Korea, such views are emerging that Nakai is taking singularly isolated contacts with the North in a situation where the situation around the North has become very fluid. It is also reported that Prime Minister Noda knew about this contact, so the Korean side must have requested an explanation from the Japanese side."41

Fourth, and possibly most important, Noda's public message to North Korea began to acquire nuances not recently seen. Conspicuously, this shift was visible in his meeting with Wen Jiabao on December 25, 2011 in Beijing. According to the MOFA home page, the North Korean issue dominated their foreign policy discussions. In the six initiatives published in Japanese, North Korea appears prominently twice: in the first one on "enhancing mutual trust in the political arena," and in the sixth one on, "strengthening dialogue and cooperation on regional and global issues." However, the content was not particularly new, emphasizing the importance of Japan-China cooperation, the success of the Six-Party Talks, and the need to resolve the abduction issue.⁴² Yet, the English version of the same home page adds a statement. Apparently, Noda said, "Japan's basic policy is the Japan-DPRK Pyongyang Declaration and its comprehensive approach."43 This can be interpreted as Noda's desire to get beyond the fixation over abductions. After the surprising news of a breakthrough in U.S.-North Korean negotiations, a Japanese newspaper reported "some government officials are whispering about decoupling the Six-Party Talks and the abduction issue.⁴⁴ One can assume that in top-level diplomatic exchanges such a nuanced policy shift has already been transmitted to the U.S. and South Korean governments. Interestingly, the first public indication of that message was apparently in Noda's statement to Wen Jiabao. 45

CONCLUSION

Korean unification and the policy adopted toward North Korea are matters of utmost strategic importance for Japan. For South Korea, these are fundamental issues of when and how to regain its national identity and to put an end to its tragic history starting from Japan's annexation, leading to a divided country, and following with the devastating Korean War with all its human losses. For Japan, how to reestablish relations with North Korea is one of the outstanding issues originating from World War II, but the issue of unification is primarily to be determined by the will of Korean people. Realists might argue that for countries surrounding the peninsula, the present-day split of Korea may best serve their strategic interest, but at the same time, no country would dare to appear as an obstacle, should the will of the North and the South converge toward unification.

What kind of policy should Japan take toward North Korea, bearing in mind its ultimate objective as described above, but at the same time, coordinating its policy with essential regional powers—especially with the United States, South Korea, and possibly with China? The Japanese government has to consider whether it is in Japan's long-term interest to normalize relations with North Korea before or after unification. All realists' power-based arguments probably favor normalization prior to unification, simply because Japan might have a better bargaining position against the weak North than a powerful united Korea. But that realism becomes totally illusionary if the Japanese government does not take into account the positions taken by South Korea and the United States, and, in some possible scenarios, China. If Japan is really prepared to take a flexible approach, as was hinted by Noda's December 25th statement, coordination becomes critically important.

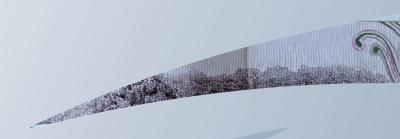
This embryonic policy change hinges on Noda's leadership position in domestic politics. His domestic reform agenda, tackling the fundamental issues of the tax system and social security, faces a string of potential crises: on the adoption of a budget, on the possibility of an opposition attack, and in June on the possibility of the dissolution of parliament.⁴⁶ If the LDP fails to muster enough power, a new political movement led by the Ishinnokai (Committee of Restoration) may be able to gather unexpected momentum. Hashimoto Toru, elected in February 2008 as governor of Osaka, at first challenged the duplication between the prefecture and city of Osaka, vanquishing the opposition in the city by being elected its mayor in December 2011. After this stunning success, he is reportedly planning new moves directed at central government politics. So far, the foreign policy objectives of Ishinnokai are too vague to gauge, apart from its support of relations with the United States and Australia.⁴⁷ With leadership in Japan too fluid to be confident of any predictions, especially with foreign policy implications, decisions on the Korean peninsula are not likely to be rushed in 2012.

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