

Japan' s North Korea Adventure

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Trilateral cooperation among the U.S., China, and South Korea is under development in order to address the North Korean question in a renewed fashion. Until the advent of Xi Jinping' s leadership, China often tends to advocate North Korean position, putting peace and stability on the Korean peninsula as a diplomatic priority. This actually meant that denuclearizing North Korea comes after stable management of the Kim regime in North Korea. However, the third nuclear test by the new North Korean leadership in February, 2013, altered the situation. Despite Chinese persuasion that North Korea should avoid provocative actions against international society, North Korea went on their way. After that, Chinese showed an open consent to the U.N. resolution against North Korea. As North Korea raised the tensions on the Korean peninsula, China literally applied sanctions against North Korea, including the closure of North Korean bank in China. United States showed firm security commitment to South Korea by displaying high-tech weapons system to deter North Korean provocations. South Korean president Park repeatedly announced that North Korea' s bad behavior would never be compensated. Also, she said she would cut a vicious circle of North Korean provocation followed by dialogue and assistance and then falling again into the trap of suddenly cutting the deal and returning to the provocation.

Now three country leaders Obama, Park, and Xi- are in agreement that, without attitudinal change that complies to international norms and standards, North Korean gesture of dialogue can hardly be embraced. Alarmed by the delicate change of mood, North Korean leader dispatched Choi Ryong Hae to China as a special envoy. However, Xi told him that North Korea should be denuclearized. North

Korea suddenly made a suggestion for an inter-Korean dialogue on June 6, just two days before the U.S.-China summit meeting, which ended up with an abortive attempt. When Obama and Xi met in the U.S. on June 8, both leaders confirmed that denuclearization of North Korea is in the common interest of the two countries and North Korea's nuclear status can never be accepted. Irritated by the diplomatic isolation, North Korea suggested a dialogue with the United States on June 16. However, despite this North Korean endeavor to disguise their provocative outlook, South Korea and China are likely to agree upon the principle of denuclearizing North Korea at a summit meeting scheduled on June 27.

The fact that three countries confirmed their will to denuclearize North Korea is a remarkable development. This will hamper North Korean adventure to take advantage of different positions revealed by six party talk participants. Though North Korea claims that it is a nuclear state and that dialogue should be advanced on the basis of acknowledging North Korea's new nuclear status, all the six party talk member countries except North Korea are not going to accept North Korea's indulgent claims.

It seems that North Korea is well aware of the newly developing consensus among the neighboring countries. That is why North Korea suddenly changed its attitude and suggested dialogues with South Korea and the United States. Also out of an endeavor to make an outlet for diplomatic impasse, North Korea invited Mr. Iijima of Japan to test the possibility of opening a new chapter in North Korea-Japan relations. However, the hurdle for improving bilateral ties between North Korea and Japan is too high, because Japan is interested in resolving abductees issues first. However, both parties understand that it is neither free of charge nor politically safe. North Korea learned a painful lesson in 2002 that, if they release Japanese abductees to their home country, that would only aggravate the situation by provoking anti-North Korean emotion among the ordinary Japanese rather than finding a new breakthrough. Also, Japan is fully aware that North Korea would demand huge amount of money or diplomatic normalization as a price for redressing the issue.

Therefore, both North Korea and Japan utilized the Iijima's visit for domestic and international political gesture. North Korea sent a signal to other countries that it can open underutilized channel of communication if trilateral cooperation advances to put pressure on North Korea. North Korea wants to use Japan as an escape route for downgrading diplomatic isolation. On the other hand, Japanese leader condoned Iijima's move on the assumption that his visit can show a political willingness of Abe to resolve the abductees issue during his tenure at least to the Japanese domestic audiences. Though the issue can hardly be resolved by one time deal, the Abe cabinet can open an independent dialogue channel with North Korean counterpart. Also, Japan can send a diplomatic signal that it has its own way of handling the North Korea issue, though three countries South Korea, U.S.,

and China- neglects Japan's role. However, Japan's adventure has been criticized by South Korea and the United States as an untimely and uncoordinated action which can give a wrong signal to North Korea. It may end up with providing an exit when sanctions and pressures are on the move.

It is all too often desirable to open a dialogue with North Korea as long as North Korea is sincere enough to talk about denuclearizing the country. However, if the aim of the dialogue is to get international approval of its nuclear status or just to shirk away the moment of crisis, dialogue for dialogue should never be accepted positively. As the three countries leaders agree, denuclearizing North Korea should be a firm consensus on which dialogue or negotiation should be opened. Japan should not be an exception, because denuclearized North Korea serves the interest of Japan as well. Rather than taking an independent course of action, Japan should be willing to jump on the ship of newly developing consensus in Northeast Asia.



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