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Japan's Continuing Scepticism towards Korean Denuclearization

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Throughout 2018, Japan has consistently taken a sceptical attitude towards the progress of Korean denuclearization talks. Even as U.S. president Donald Trump went from threatening nuclear war to declaring that he and the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un "fell in love", the Japanese government maintained its advocacy of "maximum pressure". However, following the 3rd Inter-Korean summit in September and with plans underway for a second Trump-Kim meeting, there are signs that Tokyo is belatedly reconsidering its position. Doubts remain, however, about the extent to which Japan is really willing and able to play an active role in this process.

At the start of the year, Japan appeared in lockstep with its U.S. ally on North Korea policy. Japanese prime minister Abe Shinzō did not, of course, join Trump in calling Kim Jong-un "little rocket man" or threatening "fire and fury", but his government was equally firm in committing to the isolation of the North Korean regime. In particular, in a phone call on 14 February, the Japanese and U.S. leaders agreed that there would be "no meaningful dialogue" until Pyongyang agreed on "complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization". Justifying this position, Abe told journalists that "Dialogue for the sake of dialogue would be meaningless".

Given this shared commitment, the Abe administration was taken aback when Trump agreed in March to meet with the North Korean leader. When this historic summit duly took place in Singapore in June, there was further dismay in Japan that the joint statement included Kim Jong-un's "unwavering commitment to complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula", yet no mention of the process being "verifiable" and "irreversible". The statement also included nothing about the issue of the

Japanese citizens who were abducted by North Korean agents during the 1970s and 1980s. This remains a prominent political issue in Japan, and Abe had secured Trump's promise to raise it at the Singapore summit.

In the weeks that followed, there was no discernible change in Japan's stance. Even as the other five members of the original six-party talks the United States, North Korea, China, Russia, and South Korea all sought to press forward, Japan remained aloof, dogmatically insisting on the need for further concrete steps by Pyongyang before engagement could begin. Japan's defence White Paper, which was released at the end of August, also featured no adjustment in threat assessment, with North Korea's missile and nuclear programmes still characterised as "an unprecedentedly serious and imminent threat to Japan's security".

At last, however, Japan is beginning to show a little more flexibility. Most strikingly, during his address to the UN General Assembly on 25 September, Prime Minister Abe stated that, "I am also ready to break the shell of mutual distrust with North Korea, get off to a new start, and meet face-to-face with Chairman Kim Jong-un." The next day, Japanese foreign minister Kōno Tarō met with his North Korean counterpart Ri Yong-ho. This was described by the Japanese government as "a substantial sit-down-style meeting", and Kōno is thought to have taken the opportunity to affirm that Japan is, in principle, willing to provide economic assistance to North Korea.

Additionally, there are rumours that Japan may be considering joining the Greater Tumen Initiative (GTI), an intergovernmental mechanism designed to promote infrastructure connections between China, Mongolia, Russia, and South Korea. With North Korea also thinking of rejoining, the GTI could theoretically provide a conduit through which Japan could contribute financially to Korean trans-peninsular infrastructure projects.

The North Korean side appears to welcome the apparent change in Tokyo's stance and seems open to including Japan within the sierra of summits that has emerged since the Panmunjom Declaration in April. Specifically, at the end of September, South Korean President Moon Jae-in conveyed to Prime Minister Abe that Kim Jong-un was ready to "have a dialogue with Japan at an appropriate time".

Deep underlying scepticism

Although the evolution of Japanese rhetoric is a significant development, it should not be overlooked that Japan retains its predominantly mistrustful attitude towards the ongoing peace process. Moreover, there are four key reasons why Japan's contribution is likely to remain limited.

Firstly, the Abe administration does not accept that the events of the last six months truly represent an historic new era on the Korean peninsula. Instead, the attitude prevails that this is simply another instance of the Kim dynasty using insincere promises in order to secure political and economic concessions. As such, the reason for Tokyo's apparent change in attitude is not the belief that the current process will actually succeed. Rather, the Japanese government is motivated by the desire to reduce its isolation from the ongoing diplomatic activity and to superficially realign Japan's position with that of its U.S. ally. After the expected failure of the current denuclearization efforts, Tokyo will then push for the reassertion of a hard-line approach.

Secondly, there is very little trust of President Moon within Japan's ruling elite, with some members of the Liberal Democratic Party viewing him as a dangerous North Korean sympathiser. These suspicious attitudes are related to the 2015 joint statement, in which the South Korean government agreed that the "comfort women" issue was "resolved finally and irreversibly" and that it would refrain from criticising Japan internationally about this topic. "Comfort women" is the euphemism for the women and girls forced to work in military brothels in territories occupied by Imperial Japan. Although Moon says he will not abandon the 2015 agreement, the Japanese government feels that he has broken its conditions by participating in South Korea's first "comfort women" day in August and by launching a new "comfort women" research institute. Thirdly, the abductions issue is a major obstacle to closer relations between Japan and North Korea. Seoul appears to have downplayed the issue of its own abducted citizens in order to prevent this sensitive topic from damaging the broader diplomatic rapprochement. Tokyo, by contrast, has made abductions its number one priority, elevating it above the objectively more important missile and nuclear threats. In particular, Abe is personally associated with this issue. He rose to political prominence by championing the cause of the abductees, and is rarely to be seen without the blue badge on his lapel, which is the symbol of this cause.

The Abe government has therefore made progress on the abduction issue a condition of political and economic engagement with Pyongyang. The was made clear in Abe's UN speech, in which he stated that any summit with Kim Jong-un "must be a meeting that contributes to the resolution of the abductions issue." Kōno is also believed to have told his North Korean counterpart that Japanese economic assistance would only be initiated after progress is made on the abduction issue.

This is likely to prove a difficult precondition since Pyongyang claims that the matter is already closed. Of the 17 citizens that the Japanese government alleges were abducted, North Korea states that, other than the five who were repatriated in 2002, eight have already died and four others never entered the country. Previous efforts by the Abe administration led to an agreement in 2014 under which the North Korean side agreed to conduct a new investigation in exchange for an easing of

Japanese sanctions. Ultimately, however, no real progress was achieved and Pyongyang scrapped the investigation in 2016.

Lastly, questions may be asked about the extent of Japanese government enthusiasm for the cause of Korean unification. This is because a united Korea, with a population of over 75 million, could be a serious rival to Japanese regional influence. Additionally, while the Japanese leadership would unquestionably like to achieve the denuclearization of North Korea, there may be some within the government who find some value in the short-term continuation of the North Korea threat since it can be deployed as an argument in favour of revising Japan's pacifist constitution.

Conclusion

Overall then, despite a tentative change in emphasis since September, Japan remains dubious about the wisdom of the current peace initiative by the Moon administration. If the process continues and proves successful, the Japanese government will further modify its position in order to minimise the distance between itself and the United States. In general, however, Tokyo's lack of trust in Moon, its fixation on the abductions issue, and its fears about the implications of Korean unification will ensure that Japan remains a reluctant contributor to this process.

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