

# **Japan-North Korea Relations Since the North-South Summit: Stuck in an Ever Deepening and Divisive Rut**

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*Japan-North Korea relations have slipped into an ever deepening and divisive rut since the North-South summit of 2000, with little prospect of significant improvement in the near term. Japan has both intentionally and unintentionally constructed around itself a framework of international and domestic policy constraints that impede its ability to engage North Korea both bilaterally and trilaterally via US-South Korea-Japan co-ordination efforts. In particular, as the US and South Korea contemplate renewed engagement efforts with the North, Japan's ability to follow its trilateral partners is hamstrung by domestic pressure on the abductions issue. The consequence could be that Japan will find itself as the most reluctant and least able of the trilateral partners to engage the North. In turn, this could mean that it is unable to provide crucial background support for international engagement efforts, and even undermine overall US and South Korea strategy. Meanwhile, the incapacitation of Japan's diplomatic policy has had the effect of strengthening Japanese military containment efforts towards the North.*

## **Prospects for US-South Korea-Japan strategy towards North Korea**

### *Diplomatic deadlock?*

2001-2002, yet again, have not been vintage years for Japan-North Korea relations. Japan-North Korea bilateral normalisation talks suspended in October 2000 (only reinitiated in April of the same year after a near eight-year gap following their original suspension in November 1992) failed to restart in 2001 and there is no immediate sign that this situation will change in 2002. The diplomatic deadlock was reinforced by increased bilateral tensions over financial scandals associated with the North Korean community resident in Japan from late 2001 onwards; the sinking of a suspected North Korean 'spy ship' (*fushinsen*) by a Japan Coast Guard (JCG) vessel on 22-23 December 2001; and continued suspicions over the alleged abductions by the North of

Japanese citizens, known in Japanese as *racchi jiken*. The problematic nature of Japan-North Korea relations was further highlighted by the incident in which five North Koreans failed to obtain asylum in the Japanese consulate in Shenyang, China, in May 2002; and by Japan's decision to salvage the wreck of the North Korean spy ship from China's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in June and July of the same year. The fact that the Japan-North Korea normalisation process is now close to surpassing in length that for Japan-South Korea relations (the former requiring so far eleven years, and the latter twelve years in total), and that bilateral relations have moved ever more into the negative, has been broadly reflective of, and, indeed, inter-linked with, the general stagnation in US and South Korea bilateral engagement efforts towards the North throughout much of 2001-2002. The impasse in the relations of these two states with North Korea has been demonstrated most vividly with the armed clash between North and South Korean patrol boats in the Yellow Sea on 29 June 2002. This resulted in the harsh domestic criticism of President Kim Dae Jung's 'Sunshine Policy' within South Korea, and the US announcement that it would postpone a scheduled visit to Pyongyang by James Kelly, US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs.

However, since early 2002 other signs of change have appeared in North Korea's respective bilateral relations with the US, South Korea and Japan, which, although both positive and negative in nature, may offer some prospect of eventually moving forward the rapprochement process on the Korean Peninsula. US-North Korea relations have clearly undergone a general deterioration due to President George W. Bush's identification of North Korea in the State of the Union Address in January 2002 as constituting part of the 'axis of evil', and by implication as a potential target

of the extension of the ‘war on terrorism’.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the Bush administration’s generally harder line towards North Korea and insistence on specific reciprocity in any future negotiations—evidenced first by what might be seen with some justification by the North as a near perfidious attempt to attach additional conditions concerning reductions in its conventional weapons and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD) before the US was willing to fulfil its original obligations under the Agreed Framework (AF) of 1994, and most recently in March 2002 with the administration’s refusal to ‘certify’ that the North had complied with the AF’s provisions to freeze its nuclear programme, then followed by its issuing of waivers to allow the continuation of fuel oil supplies, but all serving as a warning of US intentions—could function to further frustrate the North’s overall strategy of seeking improved ties with the US, back it into a corner, and generate new military brinkmanship employing its remaining, if declining, conventional and missile assets. The North’s declaration that its self-imposed moratorium on missile tests may cease in 2003, in tandem with the determination of sections of the Bush administration to reinterpret the AF as obligating the North to begin immediate cooperation with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections of its nuclear facilities, could lead to new missile and nuclear crises.

#### *Diplomatic movement?*

Nevertheless, although US-North Korea relations have worsened in both rhetorical and substantial terms, there may also be some opportunities for progress in bilateral relations. The Bush administration’s labelling of North Korea as part of an ‘axis of evil’ was clearly in part for domestic consumption and an exercise in making up the necessary threesome of numbers. Renewed and major military instability on the

Korean Peninsula is clearly not an option for US policy-makers mindful as they are of China's effective veto over any military intimidation of the North, that the US military requires North Korea to provide threats and not wars to legitimise its position in the Asia-Pacific, and that the limits to US power globally and regionally are rapidly reappearing as the conflict in Afghanistan drags on. Hence, the US's declared willingness to hold substantial talks 'anywhere, any time' (beyond informal talks carrying on at the UN) with North Korea might yet be realised.<sup>2</sup> The Bush administration having conducted the mandatory, if somewhat confused and unnecessary (not to say destructive in adding to the factors undermining President Kim Dae Jung's 'Sunshine Policy') review of policy will, all too predictably, return to the essential conclusion of its predecessor and the Perry Report of September 1999 that engagement is the optimum means to deal with the North Korean security problem. It may even be the case that the hiatus imposed on US-North Korea relations, the relatively 'plain-talking' line of the Bush administration, the US's call for specific reciprocity (something that US policy-makers are being myopic in seeking anew as they already have it to a degree in the AF, but are highly unlikely to receive more of until they fulfil their own obligations, and would be better off converting into a recognition of the benefits of a more diffuse reciprocity), and whatever hybrid 'Clinton administration-engagement policy with Bush-style characteristics' that emerges, may actually be easier to stomach domestically for the US Congress, and thus empower Bush to offer more in subsequent negotiations. North Korea, for its part, despite its usual bellicose rhetoric and genuine annoyance at the US abandonment of diplomatic niceties in describing the regime in Pyongyang, and although it has regained some confidence following the apparent shock of its inclusion in the 'axis of evil' and now understands US intentions more clearly, is also

likely to try to respond to US offers of negotiations within the parameters of the limited concessions that it is likely to be offered and the creaking restraints of its reform dilemma-ridden domestic political economy.

The possibility of renewed and hopefully constructive dialogue on the Korean Peninsula has been indicated recently also with North Korea's response to Kim Dae Jung's last gasp attempts to get the Sunshine Policy (hamstrung since early 2001 by US passivity in backing the South's approaches to the North and being willing to push its own relations with the North in step with the South; as well as by Kim Dae Jung's own failure to address his domestic critics at an earlier stage) back on track before the end of his presidency. The visit of special presidential envoy Lim Dong Won to Pyongyang at the start of April 2002 secured the first inter-governmental contacts for five months, and North Korean promises to resume family reunions, economic co-operation talks, and to accept the visit of a US envoy. Although these promising developments have subsequently been set back by the June 2002 patrol boat clash and the heightened domestic criticism of Kim Dae Jung's engagement policy.

#### *Japan and North Korea*

These faltering movements in US and South Korean bilateral relations with North Korea have also been matched by mixed developments in Japan-North Korea relations. In mid-March 2002, Hiramatsu Kenji, Director of the Northeast Asia Division of the Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, held secret talks with his North Korean counterparts in Beijing to request information on an additional *racchi jiken* incident involving Arimoto Keiko and recently featured prominently in the Japanese

media.<sup>3</sup> In early April, Japan and North Korea also scheduled in Singapore the first inter-ministerial contacts since July 2000, when Sakaguchi Chikara, the Japanese minister of Health, Labour and Welfare, was due to discuss Japanese assistance for North Korean casualties of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki Atomic Bombings. Moreover, repeatedly throughout late March and early April, Prime Minister Koizumi Junichirō stated the government of Japan's position that it too was willing to hold talks with the North at any time if it met certain conditions. Japan-North Korea relations were again set back by the North's cancellation of the inter-ministerial talks in April. However, the North, clearly frustrated by its lack of progress in relations with the US and looking to create more diplomatic leeway by returning to talks with Japan, agreed in bilateral Red Cross negotiations to resume the search for 'missing persons' (*yukue fumei* in Japanese, and a compromise term for *racch jiken*). North Korean foreign ministry officials indicated in May that they might be willing to resume normalisation talks with Japan. The North's government also appeared to be behind the announcement in early July by four former members of the Japan Red Army (JRA), given sanctuary in Pyongyang since their hijacking of a Japanese airliner in 1970, that they were willing to return to Japan—a clear sign that the North was looking to conciliate Japan, as well as attempting to secure its removal from the US's list of states sponsoring terrorism, which has formed one major obstacle to improved ties with both states.<sup>4</sup>

Hence, as of mid-2002, and despite the interruption occasioned by the June patrol boat clash, it appears that US, South Korean and Japanese overall policy is edging back towards renewed, if fitful and limited, bilateral dialogue with North Korea. The Trilateral Co-ordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) which adjusts these three sets

of bilateral relations with the North amongst the US and its South Korean and Japanese allies is also functioning more smoothly. The TCOG meeting in Tokyo on April 9 welcomed the progress in North-South relations following Lim's visit to Pyongyang. Coming in the wake of the patrol boat incident, the next TCOG meeting in Washington on 8 July was more circumspect about engagement with the North, but nevertheless the Japanese and South Korean representatives came with message of urging the US to consider renewed dialogue with the North. Despite the relatively enhanced degree of willingness of the involved parties to resume dialogue, it is clear that the future course of the North Korean security problem remains uncertain. US-North Korea dialogue if it restarts in earnest may founder on the issues of ballistic missiles and WMD, and the failure of this dialogue will probably impact on the North's willingness to continue dialogue with the South. Kim Dae Jung, already a lame duck president in the final months of his administration, will be anxious to move dialogue forward and actualise the promised visit of Kim Jong Il to Seoul in order to ensure his historical legacy and to influence the future course of North-South relations. These efforts, though, will only succeed if the US provides less passive backing for engagement policies and the domestic critics of engagement can be won over. Consequently, the Korean Peninsula security situation remains fragile and can oscillate between conflict and conciliation scenarios in line with US and South Korea actions.

*Japan's as facilitator or obstacle?*

Just as importantly, and possibly crucially, renewed attempts to ensure stability on the Korean Peninsula through engagement with North Korea are likely to depend on the degree to which Japan is willing to seek dialogue with the North, and the related

degree to which it can extend assistance to the US and South in their respective efforts, and thereby maintain the co-ordinated trilateral approach to North Korea. For in spite of the recent signs that Japan is willing to engage the North, at the same time most of the indications are that the negative aspects continue to the positive aspects in Japan-North Korea bilateral relations and that this may form a continued and important drag on wider trilateral engagement efforts. Hence, Japan may have made contact renewed diplomatic contacts with North Korea since March 2002, but this was to discuss the overwhelmingly negative issue of the *racchi jiken*. Similarly, Koizumi urged North Korea to engage in talks with Japan throughout April of the same year, but this was constantly prefaced with the remarks that the necessary condition for the talks was that the North should be forthcoming on dealing with the issue of abductions.

Following the outline above of recent developments in Korean Peninsula security, and given the fact that Japan may actually be emerging again as the most reluctant (and indeed, as will be demonstrated later on, least able) of the TCOG partners to move forward with dialogue, the remainder of this paper is devoted to considering what is likely to be the impact of Japan's position on the future of North-South reconciliation and Japan's own diplomatic and security policy. In the past it is clear that Japan has been seen as a key, if more of a background and support, player in Korean Peninsula security affairs. Japan's principal role has been to provide economic assistance for the stabilisation of North Korea in the form of funding for the Korean Energy Development Organisation (KEDO) and food aid, and also to provide bases under the bilateral US-Japan security treaty for US power projection capabilities on the Korean Peninsula—a role further augmented with the revision of the Guidelines for US-Japan



security co-operation from 1997 onwards. Hence, the important question now facing US and South Korean policy-makers is the degree to which Japan can be relied upon to play both these engagement and containment support roles in co-ordination with its TCOG partners.

In order to answer these questions, the article first investigates Japanese diplomatic, economic and military policy towards North Korea within the context of US and South Korean strategy and evaluates what common policy lessons have been drawn from the experience of the three states and the degree to which Japan can be expected to adhere to these in the present and future; and, in turn, how divergent Japanese behaviour could pose certain destabilising risks for any trilateral approach to establishing stability on the Korean Peninsula. Based on this investigation, this article concludes that Japan has increasingly become an obstructive and possibly divisive factor in trilateral co-operation. More specifically, this is due to the fact that Japanese policy-makers have constructed around themselves, both intentionally and unintentionally, a structure of international and domestic constraints that make it hard for Japan to break out of its passivity in dealing with North Korea. The outcome of this is that on the one hand, Japan has been unable to exert significant influence on the US to avoid unwanted conflict scenarios on the Korean Peninsula, but on the other has been unable to provide significant support for the US and South Korea for its own preferred policy option of engagement with the North. All in all, then, Japanese diplomatic and economic strategy towards the Korean Peninsula has suffered from heavy inertia, and become essentially 'strategy-less'. Instead the only area of Japanese policy which has seen and will continue to see movement in the future is its military

response to North Korea through enhanced co-operation with the US and the build-up of its own independent military capabilities.

## **US, South Korea and Japan strategy towards North Korea**

### *US and South Korea policy lessons*

Arguably, policy-makers from the US and South Korea have derived a number of key policy lessons from the recent history of the North Korean security problem, and particularly in the period from the nuclear crisis of 1994 through to the end of the Clinton administration, many of which found voice in the eventual compilation of the Perry Report.<sup>5</sup> As noted above, the Bush administration has taken pains to distance itself from Clinton administration policy, but it is likely that over the medium to longer term, and even taking into account differences of emphasis, many of the principles of the Perry Report in their broadest sense will continue to inform US and South Korean policy.

The first of these principles is the need for a mixed balance of containment and engagement.<sup>6</sup> This is demonstrated by Clinton and Bush administration efforts to ensure that North Korea should be deterred from further military brinkmanship through the upgrading of the capabilities of US and South Korean forces, as well as the upgrading of the political and military operability of the US-Japan alliance.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, though, the need for engagement to complement containment, particularly in the diplomatic and economic spheres has also been recognised. The KEDO project, extension of food aid, and efforts to spur on North-South economic co-operation are all examples of such forms of engagement which were initiated prior

to and which have been maintained (even with some difficulty) since the advent of the Bush administration.

The second principle has been that there is a need for mutually reinforcing levels of containment and engagement. Hence, US, South Korea and Japanese policies to deal with the North Korean security problems have sought to function on the level of bilateral normalisation negotiations; the level of trilateral co-ordination via the TCOG to co-ordinate bilateral links; and the fuller multilateral level through involving North Korea in bodies such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) since 2000, and South Korean efforts to encourage EU member states (so far done in a uncoordinated fashion that derides any ambitions of a Common Foreign and Security Policy [CFSP]) to normalise relations with the North as a measure of reassurance for its status in the international community.

The third principle has been to practice the above two principles with a combined sense of long-termism, magnanimity, and implacability. Although possibly forgotten by the Bush administration in its early stages, the lesson learned by the Clinton administration in its latter stages and by the Kim Dae Jung administration from the very start, was that the regional powers could not follow a policy of coaxing North Korea out of its international isolation and increasing its interdependency with the outside world unless it was first accepted that the North had the legitimate right to exist as a sovereign state; that it was unlikely to collapse internally; and that a long-term strategic vision was necessary based on the realisation that plans should be made in regard to the North as it is, rather than as policy-makers might hope it should be. In addition, it also became clear that whilst taking a tough line, it was also possible to

provide the North with concessions based on cool-headed judgement as to whether the North was prepared to reciprocate in a direct or diffuse fashion, and that the least successful policy would be one which allowed the North to goad any one of TCOG states into an action that would allow the North to trade one off against another.

Finally, the fourth policy lesson derived was the position of Japan as forming the keystone for the platform for US and South Korean policies towards North Korea. In terms of containment, as already noted, Japan's position is key in providing bases for US power projection, as well as holding in reserve certain economic sanctions. In terms of engagement, Japan has always been envisaged as providing major slices of funding and expertise for KEDO, food aid, and for the economic reform and reconstruction of North Korea.

The first three policy lessons would appear to be largely generic to both the Clinton and Bush administrations, even if the modality and timing of how they are instrumentalised may display some differences. The fourth policy lesson that Japan is the central supporting plank of US and South Korean containment and engagement policies towards the North also, arguably, remains unchanged. Indeed, the Bush administration's 'Japan-handlers' have clearly envisaged before and since taking office that Japan should certainly play an enhanced role in shaping trilateral containment and engagement policy towards North Korean policy<sup>8</sup>, and Kim Dae Jung has worked hard to try to keep Japan on board engagement efforts in the face of various hardships outlined below both prior to and after the North-South summit. Following this outline of general policy principles, the paper now moves on to examine Japan-North Korea bilateral relations within the context of trilateral US-

South Korea-Japan strategy, the factors that have shaped Japan's own policy, and to examine to what degree Japan has managed to conform and diverge from its TCOG partners. By doing so, it will be possible to reveal the extent to which Japan is actually becoming an impediment to resuming efforts to stabilise the Korean Peninsula since 2002.

### *Japan's policy towards North Korea*

The official government position since 1998 has been that it pursues a policy of 'deterrence' and 'dialogue' towards North Korea, and although the government has been keen to emphasise that it retains control over bilateral relations with North Korea, it has also been careful to stress that this two-pronged approach is largely in conformity with the containment and engagement policies of the US and South.

There can certainly be no doubt that Japanese policy-makers, consisting in this case of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and certain elements of the governing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), have been conscious of the need to engage North Korea since the end of the Cold War, if not since the period of East-West détente in the mid-1970s. Japan's policy-makers have been prepared to experiment with dialogue with North Korea and looked to achieve the normalisation of diplomatic relations for a variety of not necessarily mutually exclusive motivations, including: the desire to contribute to the overall stability of Northeast Asia and promote the reunification of the Korean Peninsula; to counter the threat of WMD and ballistic missile proliferation; to clear up the legacy of colonial history; and to promote bilateral economic relations and secure access to personal financial benefits for certain key political figures.<sup>9</sup> Japan's optimum and long-term strategy, and the one

generally accepted by the most influential policy-makers, for dealing with North Korea, therefore, has been one of engagement.

Japan's first opportunity for full engagement with North Korea came with the end of the Cold War and the start of bilateral normalisation negotiations in 1991. The progress (or lack of it) of these negotiations, leading to their suspension in 1992, is detailed elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> Here, however, it is suffice to point out that MOFA agreed to initiate the talks on the basis that there would no preconditions and all subjects would be subject to discussion. In turn, after the talks actually started there emerged a number of sources of contention, including: North Korea's demands for an apology and compensation for the periods of Japanese colonial and wartime rule in Korea; Japan's demand that the North should allow the visits to Japan of Japanese-born spouses of North Korean citizens (known as Japanese wives, or *Nihonjinzuma*); that North Korea should accede to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) demands to open its nuclear facilities to inspection; and, most importantly for recent developments in Japan-North Korea relations, that the North should provide reassurances about the safety of a Japanese citizen alleged to have been abducted to North Korea and implicated in the bombing of a South Korean airliner in 1987—the first of the *racchi jiken* to emerge as a crucial bilateral problem.<sup>11</sup>

These bilateral problems on their own were sufficient to lead to the suspension of normalisation talks—the North walking out of the talks in 1992 in protest at Japan's insistent raising of the *racchi jiken* and implicit accusation that it was involved in state-sponsored kidnappings. However, a further brake on the progress of bilateral normalisation talks was placed by Japan's reassurances to South Korea from 1990-91

onwards that it would only pursue negotiations with the North in reference to concomitant progress in North-South dialogue. This policy of linkage or *renkei* was non-binding in an official sense, but was the start of tying MOFA into a Japan-South Korea concert in dealing with North Korea, and also to form one side of the trilateral framework of US-South Korea-Japan trilateral co-ordination mentioned earlier. The other sides of the trilateral framework itself were given shape by increased US-Japan, US-South Korea, Japan-South Korea bilateral summit meetings and consultations on the North Korean nuclear issue. Then, following the passing of the nuclear crisis and initiation of the Agreed Framework and KEDO, the trilateral framework was given more formal and regularised shape.

The effect of Japan's increasing *de facto* submission of its bilateral diplomatic policy to developments in North-South relations, and trilateral co-ordination amongst the US, South Korea and Japan, has been to both open up and constrict its channels for engagement with North Korea. In one sense, Japan's co-operation with the other two powers has legitimised its more direct involvement in Korean Peninsula security affairs. But in other ways, it has limited its room for diplomatic manoeuvre by handing an effective veto to South Korea over normalisation efforts based on the *renkei* policy, which, is also itself subsequently contingent in practice upon progress in US-North relations. Japan has thus imposed a near international 'double-lock' on its diplomacy towards North Korea which comes at the bottom of the pile. The practical outcome of this situation for Japan has been that it has been obliged to synchronise attempts to restart normalisation talks with North Korea in step with improvements in North-South and US-North Korea relations. Thus in 1997 the Japanese government only felt able to make efforts to restart normalisation talks

following the start of the Four Party Peace talks, leading to an agreement between the governments for Japan to provide food aid, and that the North would allow the visits of *Nihonjinzuma*, and under the compromise formula of referring to them as ‘missing persons’ (*yukue fumei*) investigate the alleged abduction incidents.

Japan’s adherence to international restrictions on its diplomatic policy towards North Korea can be criticised on the grounds that it has simultaneously restricted its ability to deploy economic power in order to address in a more active fashion the root economic causes of North Korea’s insecurity, and pushed it towards a more passive stance.<sup>12</sup> But in the mid-1990s Japan’s policy can at least have been said to be consistent and to have been co-ordinated with those of the US and South Korea, and thus have worked to engage North Korea in frameworks such as KEDO and fulfil most of the general policy principles outlined in the previous section.

However, from late 1998 onwards Japan’s policy towards North Korea entered into a phase of becoming ‘strategy-less’, which meant that it even threatened not to support the established basis of US-South Korea-Japan co-operation. Japan’s reaction to the provocation of the North Korean test of its ‘Taepodong-1 missile’ in August 1998 was to impose limited sanctions on the North and to consider delaying the signing of the agreements to fund KEDO; and this was in spite of the fact that in the October 1998 Joint Declaration between Japan and North Korea it stated that KEDO was the most realistic framework for dealing with the North’s WMD.<sup>13</sup> Japan’s tougher stance towards North Korea in this period was also increasingly influenced by the inability of both sides to reach an agreement on the *racchi jiken*: the North angering the Japanese government with its report in June 1998 that it could find no trace of any



missing persons. As a result, throughout the period from mid-1998 to mid-1999 there was generated intense anti-North Korean feeling, bordering on hysteria, in sections of the general public and fuelled by mass media sensationalism. For instance, the Tokyo bookshops were filled with volumes proclaiming North Korea's potential guerrilla attack on Japanese nuclear power facilities and other aggressive behaviour, and the press circulated rumours of another missile test in the summer of 1999.<sup>14</sup>

The flipside to Japan's refusal to conduct dialogue with North Korea in this period was an emphasis on the deterrent aspects of its security policy towards the North. The Japanese government, in response to the Taepodong-1 launch, announced its decision in August 1999 to conduct joint technological research with the US into a Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) system and to launch four intelligence satellites.<sup>15</sup> Japan also first indicated its willingness to challenge the incursions of North Korean *fushinsen* by instructing the SDF to pursue two ships out of its territorial waters in March 1999. In April and May 1999 (not entirely coincidentally with the *fushinsen* incident), the Japanese government was able to ensure the passage of the Guidelines legislation through the Diet.

Japan was eventually brought back into line with the continuing engagement element of US and South Korean policy by the time of the APEC meeting in September 1999 and in the run up to the announcement of the Perry Report. In part, this was due to the fact that the Japanese government felt it had made sufficient protests to warn North Korea of the seriousness of its intentions and that it felt its demands over missile and the *racchi jiken* were to be built into the Perry Report and subsequent trilateral strategy.<sup>16</sup> But Japan's response was also in part the result of gentle US and South

Korean persuasion. However, even as Japan moved back into line with US and South Korean policy this created new difficulties for it in maintaining trilateral cooperation. The Japanese government certainly welcomed the North-South summit of June 2000 as contributing to the stability of the Korean Peninsula. But Japan then became somewhat apprehensive at the loosening of international restrictions and rapid pace of US-North Korea rapprochement later in the year as it seemed possible that the US might move ahead and normalise relations with the North, so forcing Japan to quicken the pace of its own bilateral negotiations before it felt it had the necessary domestic consensus in place to provide concessions to the North. In particular, the Japanese government was concerned that it might be obliged to move in concert with its trilateral partners and be placed at a disadvantageous position in negotiations, or, much more likely, that domestic opposition in Japan would simply mean that it was unable to keep pace with US and South Korean engagement towards the North and so endanger the unified trilateral approach.

However, even though Japan did move back into line, the pattern of its behaviour from 1998 to 1999 was a portent of the types of problems that its bilateral diplomacy and role in trilateral cooperation towards North Korea has experienced in 2001-2002 and may continue to experience beyond 2002. For it is clear that the Japanese government has locked itself into a set of international and domestic diplomatic restrictions that will make it progressively harder for its to exert an independent or even constructive influence on the efforts to stabilise the Korean Peninsula. On the one hand, the policy of *renkei* means that it is either relatively subordinate to, but also overly passive, in following US and South Korean initiatives towards North Korea and cannot restrain the US from either intimidating behaviour towards the North or

from moving too fast with improvements in diplomatic ties that threaten to leave Japan behind and to ‘bounce’ it into making concessions on normalisation with the North. Moreover, if Japan breaks from this *renkei* policy, then this only serves to have a divisive influence on trilateral cooperation as Japan has no alternative and authoritative vision of North Korea policy in place of that of the US and South Korea. On the other hand, the growing strength of Japanese domestic anti-North Korean sentiment, evidenced by the prominence of the *racchi jiken*, threatens to reinforce this passivity in policy and potential divergence from trilateral policy.

Hence, Japan’s activity in this period strongly diverged from the key principles outlined earlier: Japan had moved away from a mix of engagement and containment, to largely reliance on the latter; it had cut or endangered its bilateral, trilateral and multilateral linkages to engage the North; had allowed itself to be intimidated by the North and reacted in such a way that it undermined support for its partners; and came close to abdicating its own key support role for engagement policies. The following section now outlines how these factors have now come to play in Japanese diplomacy towards North Korea since 2001 and will make for potentially even greater difficulties.

*Japan’s renewed ‘strategy-less’ North Korean strategy from 2001 to 2002*

Japan got back on board the engagement aspects of the trilateral engagement strategy from late 2000 onwards, but during the first year of the new Bush administration it slipped back into a highly passive style of North Korea policy with regard to engagement, and instead concentrated once again on military containment. The Bush administration itself, as argued above, was also culpable in failing to take on board the

key lessons of North Korean policy, and its reluctance to engage North Korea meant that Japan's policy was further locked into a system of international constraints that militated against engagement.

Consequently, Japan during 2001 made few active moves to engage the North and acquiesced in a 'wait and see' policy in order to divine US policy. However, Japanese policy-makers, instead of attempting to use the hiatus in Korean Peninsula rapprochement to attempt to prepare some form of domestic consensus that would allow it to respond with assurance to the predictable about-turn of US policy and loosening of international restrictions upon engagement with the North, devoted most of its energies in this period to demonstrating its resolve to meet the North Korean security challenge with military power. In October 2001, the Japanese government succeeded in passing through the Diet, bundled together with its new anti-terrorism law and amendments to the SDF law, a revised law to allow JCG units to fire on *fushinsen*. The JCG was then obliged to utilise these revised laws in the incident which led to its sinking of a suspected North Korean vessel, first spotted in Japan's 200-nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and then pursued into China's territorial waters, between 22 and 23 December 2001. Since this incident there has been considerable speculation as to why the Japanese government chose to react in this particular manner and at this particular time when such North Korean incursions are believed to be routine, and to what degree the incident was mishandled at the operational level. Nevertheless, the Japanese government demonstrated its clear intent of reserving the option to respond with force to further incursions, and, as argued below, its subsequent determination to attempt to salvage the wreck of the *fushinsen*

from Chinese territorial waters is representative of the growing hard-line attitude towards North Korea in Japan.

Japan's emphasis on the containment over the engagement aspects of North Korea strategy was relatively unproblematic in diplomatic terms as long as the Bush administration also maintained a hard-line towards the North, and as long as the North responded in kind throughout 2001. Nonetheless, since early 2002, and as noted above, the international situation around the Korean Peninsula has shown signs of change which once again have exposed the weight of inertia in Japanese policy. Japanese policy in early 2002 was thrown into brief confusion by the 'axis of evil' speech. Japanese policy-makers, even though they were aware that Bush's address was for domestic consumption, were taken aback by the lack of warning and the sudden fear that in the aftermath of the apparently successful Afghan campaign the US might seriously be contemplating extending its war on terrorism to the Korean Peninsula.<sup>17</sup> Japanese policy-makers were subsequently reassured of US intentions with Bush's visit to Japan and South Korea in February 2002, but one effect of the 'axis of evil' speech was to demonstrate to the Japanese side how little influence they had secured over US actions with regard to North Korea due to their own highly passive submission to international constraints and the trilateral framework.

In addition to the problems of lacking a stronger voice in checking US actions with regard to North Korea, Japan's passivity is likely to create further problems in its diplomacy as its trilateral partners turn back towards engagement from mid-2002 onwards. As outlined in the introductory section to this paper, the US and South Korea may be edging back towards dialogue and more active engagement of the

North and will expect Japan to follow. Japan is indeed attempting to follow this trilateral policy line, but it may well be the case that its passivity in previous years and the increasing domestic opposition to rapprochement with North Korea will mean that it simply cannot follow the US and South Korea and fulfil its role as the essential background supporter for trilateral engagement policy. For it is clear that the Japanese government's highlighting of the North Korean security threat and especially the increasing domestic demands for a resolution to the *racchi jiken* may be reaching the point whereby even international pressure cannot easily push or persuade Japan back into the unified US-South Korea-Japan policy line.

The *racchi jiken* has now become one of the hottest political potatoes in Japanese policy to the point that few influential policy-makers in either MOFA or the LDP are willing to handle it directly. MOFA officials and LDP figures involved in making North Korea policy and attempting to resolve the abductions issue by working on the compromise formula of *yukue fumei* have been subject to a campaign of public criticism. Indeed, this criticism has often reached the level of outright pillory and intimidation by a variety of pressure groups working with the families of the alleged victims of the *racchi jiken*, and by influential daily newspapers and weekly magazines in Japan with their own axe to grind against North Korea. The *racchi jiken* have risen to a position of such importance in bilateral relations that their resolution has become, despite MOFA's original position in 1991 that there would be no preconditions and that all issues would be discussed with a view to a final settlement at the end of talks (exit or *deguchi*), the essential *de facto* (entrance or *iriguchi*) precondition for the restart and progress in normalisation negotiations. This change of policy was all but admitted by Tanaka Hitoshi, Director General of MOFA's Asian and Oceanian

Affairs Bureau, in a Diet committee session on 18 April 2002.<sup>18</sup> North Korea, for its part, (perhaps at times unintentionally due to its lack of sensitivity to domestic factors in Japan's diplomacy, but also at other times intentionally using the issue to exert pressure on Japan and to split it from its trilateral co-ordination partners) has done itself few favours with its reluctance to be at least seen to work with those elements in MOFA that are willing to take risks for the normalisation process in order to try to move the *racchi jiken* issue away from being a precondition. Prime Minister Koizumi in his pronouncements on relations with North Korea again reiterated that North Korean cooperation on the abductions was necessary for the restart of normalisation negotiations and met publicly with the relatives of the alleged *racchi jiken* victims. In addition, Koizumi is believed to have sought Chinese assistance on the issue on his visit to China in mid-April, and it is also believed that it has been the Prime Minister himself who has sought to pursue the North Korean banking scandal to its conclusion. Further evidence of the central importance of the *racchi jiken* issue for any improvement in Japan-North Korea bilateral relations was provided with the House of Representatives' passing of a resolution on 11 April 2002 which called for the Japanese government to take a tough and proactive stance in investigating the whereabouts of the alleged abductees. This coincided with the formation of an all-party Diet group, initially led by Liberal Party members, which has the intent of pressuring the government on the *racchi jiken*. Hence, the *racchi jiken* (itself an expanding issue with the addition of the Aritomo case to the list of incidents since 2001; and then media coverage of another possible abductee, Matsuki Kaoru, in late April 2002)—in conjunction with a sizeable and growing mountain of other bilateral issues including WMD, compensation, *Nihonjinzuma*, North Korea's suspected involvement in narcotics running to Japan, and demands for the return of the

remaining JRA suspects from Pyongyang—have now become an important and possibly insurmountable check on any progress in Japan-North Korea relations.

In this situation, it may be near impossible for Japan to stay on board the trilateral engagement strategy and it will again abrogate the four policy principles: devoting all its energy to containment; failing to maintain its own key bilateral channels with the North; allowing itself to be split from its trilateral partners and only encouraging North Korean ‘divide and rule’ strategies amongst the US, South Korea and Japan; and undermining its own key role and any remaining opportunities to influence the overall trajectory and pace of trilateral policy towards North Korea. The outcome is that Japan may return to a period of ‘strategy-less’ approaches in its dealing with North Korea—fearful of US unilateralism towards North Korea but also unable to fully join with a trilateral strategy due to the framework of international and domestic restraints and related passivity and limits of influence that it has placed upon itself.

**Conclusion: Is there a way out for Japanese diplomacy?**

Japan-North Korea relations as of early 2002 remain stuck in an ever deepening rut as the *racchi jiken* and other unresolved bilateral issues pile up, and this rut may become ever more divisive as Japan finds itself unable to break out of the worsening cycle of relations and to keep up with renewed US and South Korean engagement efforts. In this situation, Japan could become an unwanted and hazardous drag on efforts to promote Korean Peninsula stability. Often it is said that North Korea should not be backed into a corner, but this is one case where Japan has backed itself into a corner with equally unpredictable consequences for Korean Peninsula security co-operation. Japan could yet escape from an uncomfortable diplomatic squeeze if the US fails to



achieve any progress in relations with the North and to return to talks after a suitable intermission following the patrol boat incident, so once again allowing Japan to lapse back into passivity in its own bilateral normalisation efforts. But Japan's position will only have further counterproductive effects. Its passivity simply reinforcing US reluctance to engage the North, weakening the basis of support also for South Korean engagement efforts, and forcing the North into another confrontational stance with the regional powers—all the very antithesis of Japan's own optimum Korean Peninsula policy of engagement and stability.

The prospects for Japan being able to extricate itself from this policy rut also appear unpromising at present. Japan's policy-makers have to answer to their domestic constituencies; an inconvenience that does not affect North Korea. Moreover, the US is often a quixotic ally, that has shown itself capable of chopping and changing policy principles (which makes it all the more important that Japan should follow a consistent if more proactive line to try to nudge the US back to a true balance of containment and engagement efforts). Nevertheless, despite these international and domestic difficulties, it is also clear that Japanese policy-makers have managed to tie themselves in knots, especially over the *racchi jiken* issue. MOFA has always had the problem of how to incorporate interested LDP politicians into its North Korea strategy. On the one hand, these have offered an alternative route for dialogue, but on the other they have been interested for reasons of monetary gain and have conducted 'individual' and 'dual' diplomacy which has meant them offering North Korea concessions beyond those of the precedent of Japan-South Korea normalisation in 1965. Since 1991, MOFA has tried to wrest control away from the LDP of the domestic policy-making process towards North Korea. In certain ways it has

succeeded in this and reached an uneasy alliance with key LDP pro-North Korea figures. However, it is now the case that both MOFA and the LDP are losing control of the policy agenda, and North Korea strategy has been dictated by the *racchi jiken*, pressure groups and the mass media. This has meant that there is no effective leadership on North Korea issues within the Japanese policy-making circles, especially with regard to engagement strategy. Instead, almost by default, policy energy has gone into the remilitarisation of Japanese security policy, predicated in many instances on the North Korean threat. Japan's policy-making indecision over North Korea was also demonstrated with the Shengyang consulate incident. The Japanese government may have been strictly correct in terms of international law to protest at the intrusion into its consulate by Chinese police to recover five North Korean defectors. But the fact that the consulate staff appeared at the very least to have acquiesced in this intrusion, and that their instructions were to prevent North Korean defections, makes the Japanese government appear somewhat inconsistent in protesting at the rough treatment of the North Koreans by the Chinese authorities, and more concerned with assuming a passive and distant stance with regard to humanitarian problems in the North.

Moreover, Japan's pursuit of its goal to raise the wreckage of the *fushinsen* represents another move in ratcheting up the bilateral tensions between Japan and the North Korea. It may be the case that Japan and China came to the conclusion, separately or in their discussions in April and June that there is nothing on board the vessel, or that nothing will be found to connect any third state with the incident. This is despite the fact that there have long been suspicions that North Korean *fushinsen* routinely receive refuel at Chinese ports or in Chinese waters before entering Japan's territorial

waters.<sup>19</sup> Hence, the only incriminating evidence found so far is that to connect the ship with North Korea, including a variety of heavy weapons. Japan's refusal to let matters rest in this incident may lead to further discoveries that only send relations with North Korea plunging further into the negative.

Japanese policy is thus strategy-less, leaderless and one-dimensional towards North Korea. It may yet be the case that the US and South Korea can exert sufficient pressure on Japan to give it the momentum to overcome domestic opposition to moving forward with engagement policies. But this is something which cannot be relied upon without causing ruptures in the trilateral framework of diplomacy, or, indeed, of happening at all as long as the *racchi jiken* remain the precondition for normalisation negotiations and the North Korea question the poisoned chalice of all Japanese policy-makers.

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<sup>1</sup> *President's State of the Union Address*,  
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Donald G. Gross, 'After the "breakthrough" now what?', *Comparative Connections: An Email Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations*, vol. 4, no. 2, July 2002,  
<http://www.csis.org/pacfor/ccejournal.html#ussk>.

<sup>3</sup> *Asahi Shimbun*, 19 March 2002, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> *Asahi Shimbun*, 10 July 2002, p. 1; *Japan Times Online*, 6 May 2002,  
<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/getarticle.pl5?np20020506a6.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> William J. Perry, *Review of United States Policy Toward North Korea: Findings and Recommendations*, Washington D. C., October 12, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Victor D. Cha, 'Engaging North Korea credibly', *Survival*, vol. 42, no. 2, Summer 2000, p. 137.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher W. Hughes, 'The North Korean nuclear crisis and Japanese security', *Survival*, vol. 38, no. 2, pp. 79-103.

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<sup>8</sup> Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, *INSS Special Report, The United States and Japan: Advancing Toward a Mature Partnership*, 11 October 2000, Washington D. C., p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher W. Hughes, 'Japanese policy and the North Korean "soft landing"', *The Pacific Review*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1998: 389-415.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher W. Hughes, *Japan's Economic Power and Security: Japan and North Korea*, (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 56-61; Okonogi Masao (ed.), *Kitachōsen no Handobukku*, (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1997), pp. 405-438; Odagawa Kō, 'Nicchō kōshō o tadoru', in Hajime Izumi (ed.) *Kitachōsen: Sono Jisshō to Kiseki*, (Tokyo: Kōbunsha, 1998), pp. 247-71.

<sup>11</sup> Hughes, *Japan's Economic Power and Security*, pp. 80-88.

<sup>12</sup> Hughes, *Japan's Economic Power and Security*, pp. 207-209.

<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Japan-Republic of Korea Joint Declaration: A New Japan-Republic of Korea Partnership Toward the Twenty First Century*, October 8, 1998.

<sup>14</sup> For an example of the negative depictions of North Korea, see Iku Aso's novel, *Sensen Fukoku* (Declaration of War).

<sup>15</sup> Christopher W. Hughes, 'Sino-Japanese relations and ballistic missile defence', in Marie Söderberg (ed.) *Chinese-Japanese Relations in the Twenty First Century*, (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 69-87.

<sup>16</sup> Perry, *Review of United States Policy Toward North Korea*, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Eric Heginbotham and Richard J. Samuels, 'Japan', in Aaron L. Friedberg and Richard Ellings, eds., *Strategic Asia, 2002-3*, (Seattle, Washington.: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2002), p. 30.

<sup>18</sup> *Japan Time Online*, 19 April 2002, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/getarticle.pl5?np20020419a3.htm>.

<sup>19</sup> *Japan Times Online*, 4 July 2002, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/getarticle.pl5?np20020704a3.htm>.