

Japan & North Korea: an update and the issue of abduction

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Articles on the state of the Japan/North Korea relations as seen by the English Japanese press.

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Abe's adviser visits N. Korea, Japan eyes talks on abduction

PYONGYANG/TOKYO (Kyodo) — An adviser to Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe arrived in Pyongyang on Tuesday in an apparent attempt to push for progress in the issue of North Korea's abduction of Japanese nationals in the 1970s and 1980s.

Isao Iijima's itinerary is not immediately known, but he is believed to be staying in North Korea for a few days and may meet with senior officials of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea and the government.

Iijima is expected to convey Abe's willingness to address the abduction issue, a key obstacle to normalizing relations between the two countries.

It is the first time that a senior Japanese government official has confirmed to have entered North Korea since Abe returned to the premiership in December.

In Tokyo, a source at the prime minister's office said Iijima's visit has been authorized by Abe.

"The government used an important connection" to send Iijima to Pyongyang, the source said. "We may see some progress (on the abduction issue), but I have not heard he could go so far as bringing an abductee or abductees back to Japan."

Another Japanese government source said that Iijima's visit to North Korea was decided in a talk with Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga and Keiji Furuya, state minister in charge of dealing

with North Korea's abduction of Japanese nationals.

A senior Foreign Ministry official declined to comment, saying he is "not aware of" Iijima's trip.

Some analysts said that by hosting Iijima, North Korea appears to be trying to frustrate coordination among Japan, the United States and South Korea — and even involving China — in dealing with Pyongyang over its long-range rocket launch and the third nuclear test, as well as threats to wage nuclear war with the United States and South Korea.

Iijima was a top aide to former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, who visited Pyongyang for talks with then North Korean leader Kim Jong Il in September 2002 and May 2004.

Iijima accompanied Koizumi to both trips. Iijima is said to have his own personal connection with North Korea.

On Tuesday, Kim Chol Ho, vice director of the North Korean Foreign Ministry's Asian Affairs Department, welcomed Iijima at Pyongyang airport.

Japan and North Korea resumed intergovernmental negotiations in August last year after a four-year hiatus.

But the talks were suspended in the wake of the North's launch of a long-range rocket in December that other countries believe was a covert test of ballistic missile technology in violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions.

Kyodo News, May 14, 2013

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20130514p2g00m0dm096000c.html>

High-level Japanese and North Korean officials meet in Pyongyang

BEIJING — An adviser to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe held talks Wednesday in Pyongyang with a senior official of North Korea's ruling party, the North's official Korean Central News Agency reported.

Details of the meeting between Isao Iijima and Kim Yong Il, a secretary of the Workers' Party of Korea, were not immediately known. The meeting was announced with just a single-paragraph dispatch by the state-controlled agency.

The two officials are believed to have discussed ways to address North Korea's abductions of Japanese nationals in the 1970s and 1980s, an important issue in Japan.

Along with Kim, Iijima was expected to hold talks with Song Il Ho, ambassador for talks to normalize relations with Japan, and other officials during his unannounced visit to North Korea that began Tuesday.

Iijima plans to stay in Pyongyang until Friday, according to an informed source.

Depending on the progress of the talks, Iijima could extend his stay, the source said.

Asked about Iijima's trip, the U.S. point man on North Korea declined to comment.

Glyn Davies, U.S. special representative for North Korea policy, said after a series of meetings with Chinese officials in Beijing that he spoke with a senior Japanese official earlier Wednesday and that he was given "a little bit of information" about it.

"But for the most part, I will . . . I think . . . reserve any comment on it until I have a chance to go to Tokyo, talk to officials there. And then perhaps it will make sense for me to say a word or two about it," Davies told journalists.

Iijima was a top aide to Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi when he made historic visits to Pyongyang for talks with leader Kim Jong Il in September 2002 and May 2004.

Japan recognizes 17 nationals, including five who were repatriated in October 2002, as having been abducted by North Korea in the 1970s and 1980s. The issue remains a key obstacle to normalizing relations between the two countries.

Kyodo News, May 16, 2013

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/05/16/national/high-level-japanese-and-north-korean-officials-meet-in-pyongyang/#.UZrD9diz640>

S. Korea calls Japan envoy's visit to N. Korea 'not helpful'

SEOUL/TOKYO (Kyodo) — South Korea on Thursday criticized an ongoing visit to North Korea by an adviser to Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe as "not helpful," suggesting that Tokyo should have coordinated with Seoul and Washington in advance of the visit.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Cho Tai Young told a news briefing it is important for South Korea, the United States and Japan to coordinate on matters concerning North Korea.

"In that sense, we are of the view that envoy (Isao) Iijima's visit to North Korea is not helpful," he said.

In Tokyo, Japan's top government spokesman said Iijima's unannounced visit to Pyongyang does not deserve any criticism from other countries and suggested South Korea overreacted.

"I don't understand what (South Korea) wants to say," Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga told a press conference when asked about Cho's remarks, while reaffirming the importance of trilateral relations among Japan, the United States and South Korea.

Iijima began his visit to Pyongyang on Tuesday in an apparent attempt to push for progress in the issue of North Korea's abductions of Japanese nationals in the 1970s and 1980s.

Cho said that while Japan did not inform South Korea about the envoy's visit in advance, it later "conveyed regrets through a diplomatic channel" to South Korea for not having informed it earlier.

Iijima's trip to Pyongyang came as the top U.S. envoy on North Korea policy, Glyn Davies, was visiting South Korea on Tuesday as part of his three-nation trip that includes China and Japan. He

arrived in Tokyo on Thursday.

Asked while still in Seoul about Iijima's visit to Pyongyang, Davies was quoted by Yonhap News Agency as saying, "I had not heard of that, so that will obviously be something that I will discuss with the Japanese when I have a chance to talk to my counterparts there."

Kyodo News, May 17, 2013

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20130517p2g00m0dm006000c.html>

Japan will not take action until abduction is solved, Iijima tells N. Korea

TOKYO (Kyodo) — An adviser to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe told North Korean officials during his recent trip to Pyongyang that Japan will not budge an inch until the abduction issue involving Japanese nationals is resolved, a Japanese government source said Saturday.

In talks with North Korean officials, Isao Iijima demanded that Pyongyang return all Japanese nationals abducted by North Korea, handover the abductors and provide a full accounting of the abductions, the source said.

"The Japanese government will not take any action unless these issues are resolved," the adviser was quoted as telling the North Koreans during a just-completed four-day visit.

Iijima briefed Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga earlier in the day about his unannounced trip to North Korea, when they met at a Tokyo hotel soon after Iijima returned to Japan, the source said.

It is not known how the North Korean officials reacted to the Japanese demands.

Observers of Japan-North Korean relations are keen to learn what kind of message senior North Korean officials conveyed to Iijima about improving bilateral relations, including the issue of the abduction of Japanese in the 1970s and 1980s — a key obstacle to normalizing bilateral ties.

According to the source, Iijima told Suga he held "frank talks" with senior North Korean officials, including Kim Yong Nam, president of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly, North Korea's parliament, and Song Il Ho, ambassador for talks to normalize relations with Japan.

Iijima told the North Koreans about Japan's intention to comprehensively resolve the abduction, nuclear and missile issues, and that the abductions must be settled under Abe's government.

"I received a report (of his trip) but I cannot comment," Suga told reporters after their one-hour talks at a Tokyo hotel.

Later Saturday, Suga is expected to brief Abe, who is currently in Oita Prefecture in southwestern Japan, by telephone about Iijima's trip, the source said.

In Oita, Abe told reporters, "My mission will not end until the day when all abductees' families will (reunite) and embrace their children" and he emphasized that the issue "must be resolved under the Abe Cabinet" through a policy of dialogue and pressure.

He said he will be briefed by Suga but should the need arise, he will talk directly with Iijima.

While Abe has vowed to resolve the longstanding abduction issue, Iijima's trip has sparked concerns from the United States and South Korea.

Iijima's trip surprised the United States and South Korea, which have been working closely with Japan on coordinating their policy response to North Korea's ambition to develop long-range missiles and nuclear weapons.

"We knew that North Korea would eventually shift their strategy to that of seeking engagement in an effort to split us, and to exploit any differences in our respective national positions," Glyn Davies, the U.S. special representative for North Korea policy, told reporters on Saturday at the end of his Japan trip.

But Davies said after meeting with officials in Japan, he is confident the Japanese government is "fully aware of the challenges and pitfalls of engaging North Korea."

Kyodo News, May 17, 2013

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20130518p2g00m0fp105000c.html>

Abe to promote talks with N. Korea over abduction issue

FUKUOKA (Kyodo) — Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said Sunday he is ready to promote talks with North Korea to resolve the issue of the country's past abductions of Japanese nationals.

"I hope I can promote negotiations and dialogue (with Pyongyang)," Abe told reporters in the city of Fukuoka. "I will continue pressuring North Korea as long as the abduction issue remains unresolved."

His comments came after his adviser, Isao Iijima, made a surprise visit to Pyongyang, during which he demanded in talks with North Korean officials that Pyongyang return all of the Japanese abductees, hand over the abductors and provide a full account of the abductions.

In response, the North Korean officials told Iijima that they will report the Japanese government's demands to their leader Kim Jong Un, according to a Japanese government source.

Abe said he had been briefed by Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga about Iijima's trip but added, "I cannot reveal the content. I will talk with Mr. Iijima, if necessary."

"I am determined to achieve the return of all abductees, hunt for the truth of the abductions and secure the handover of abductors under my Cabinet," the prime minister said. "I will comprehensively resolve the issues of abduction as well as (Pyongyang's) nuclear and missile programs in accordance with the Pyongyang Declaration."

In the declaration signed in Pyongyang in 2002 by then Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and the late North Korean leader Kim Jong Il, the two countries agreed to work toward the normalization of relations.

Regarding Iijima's trip, which raised eyebrows in Washington and Seoul, economic revitalization minister Akira Amari said in an NHK talk show that Japan will take the initiative in resolving the abduction issue.

"It is an extremely important issue separate from the interests of other countries," Amari said. "It is an area in which Japan should take the initiative."

Iijima's trip surprised the United States and South Korea, which have been working with Japan on coordinating their policy response to the North's nuclear and missile programs.

"Prime Minister Abe showed the resolve to move forward, even by a step or two, the abduction issue on his own when he formed the Cabinet," Amari said when asked about the purpose of Iijima's visit, adding he hoped the meaning of the trip would be inferred as government ministers are not supposed to comment on it.

The abduction issue remains a key obstacle to normalizing relations between Japan and North Korea.

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<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20130519p2g00m0dm067000c.html>

Abe war views erode trilateral unity on N.K.

The stance of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's Cabinet on issues related to Japan's wartime history has begun to overshadow its trilateral cooperation with the United States and South Korea in dealing with defiant North Korea.

During a bilateral summit in Washington on Tuesday, U.S. President Barack Obama stressed the importance of the trilateral partnership, but South Korean President Park Geun Hye replied that for peace in East Asia, Japan should have a proper view of its history, according to South Korean sources.

Park's tough remarks came like a bolt out of the blue to Japanese officials. Before the summit, a key official in Tokyo had been optimistic, saying, "South Korea must be considering a response to North Korea separately" from the history issues.

Tokyo-Seoul relations took another body blow late last month when Japanese ministers and other lawmakers, including Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso, made ritual spring visits to Yasukuni Shrine, which South Korea and China view as a symbol of Japan's past militarism.

The U.S. also has concerns about Abe's views on Japan's wartime history.

The U.S. Congressional Research Service recently described Abe as "a strong nationalist." It said some of his statements "suggest Abe embraces a revisionist view of Japanese history that rejects the narrative of imperial Japanese aggression and victimization of other Asians."

Jiji Press, May 14, 2013

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/05/14/national/abe-war-views-erode-trilateral-unity-on-n-k/#>

Japan, U.S. differ on North strategies — Long-time allies at odds as Washington looks to dialogue and Tokyo sticks to hardline stance

The meetings Japanese leaders held this week with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry in Tokyo revealed subtle differences in their approaches to North Korea's provocations, with Washington leaning toward dialogue to defuse tensions and Tokyo toward staying firm.

The differences are even more apparent between Tokyo and Seoul, which has sought direct dialogue with Pyongyang.

"Our choice is to negotiate," Kerry said Sunday after meeting with Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida. "Our choice is to move to the table and find a way for the region to have peace. And we would hope . . . that they would come to the table in a responsible way and negotiate that."

But on Monday, after agreeing to work closely in responding to the provocations, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe told Kerry: "You mentioned dialogue, but we have been betrayed by North Korea before. I don't want you to forget that," a source with knowledge of their conversation said.

The former Massachusetts senator also praised South Korean President Park Geun Hye's offer Friday to resume dialogue with the North, saying her offer "should be welcomed."

Kerry's attitude toward Pyongyang was "more conciliatory than we had imagined," a government source said in Tokyo.

At Sunday's news conference, Kishida said that Tokyo is demanding a "comprehensive resolution" of issues concerning Pyongyang, including its nuclear and missile programs and a new investigation into the whereabouts of Japanese abducted by the North's agents in the 1970s and '80s.

"Japan has not closed the door on dialogue with North Korea in order to resolve this issue. And for this reason, North Korea must show that it is truly working toward resolving this issue in good faith," he said.

Worries on the Japanese side were also amplified by Kerry's suggestion during his visit to Seoul that the joint U.S.-South Korea military exercises under way on the Korean Peninsula have been scaled back out of concern for the North, which decries the annual drills.

Kerry's remarks "can be taken to mean that the United States has conceded to North Korean intimidation," a source close to Japanese-U.S. relations said, adding Washington's overtures may have set a "bad precedent" of backing down from escalating tensions.

The Abe government's noticeably cautious attitude toward dialogue is rooted in the abduction issue, which may become a footnote amid the focus on North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, a Japanese government source said.

In his meeting with Kerry, Abe repeated his determination to resolve the abduction issue while in office.

Meanwhile, Washington appears partially motivated by concerns that the situation on the Korean Peninsula could spin out of control over misunderstandings with the North. In a sign of its shift to a more conciliatory approach, the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama postponed the test launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile scheduled for April 9 to avoid the appearance of further provocations.

The United States is also seeking to strengthen cooperation with China, as the North's longtime patron appears increasingly impatient with Pyongyang. Kerry praised Beijing for making what he said was a "strong statement of its commitment" to ridding the Korean Peninsula of nuclear weapons.

Amid signs that the U.S. and China may be getting closer, Japan is uncertain how effectively it will be able to push its views should the stalled multilateral talks on denuclearizing North Korea resume.

Kyodo News, April 19, 2013

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/04/19/national/japan-u-s-differ-on-north-strategies/#.UXXlFEpOj1U>
