

Pressure: Mike Pence and Japanese Leader Shinzo Abe Rain on South Korea's Olympics Parade

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But the pressure could backfire, a former Japanese prime minister tells *The Nation*.

As the 2018 Winter Olympics began this month in Pyeongchang, Vice President Mike Pence and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe were in the reviewing stands on the tail end of Pence's aggressive propaganda tour in Japan and South Korea designed to counter North Korea's unprecedented diplomatic presence at the Games.

It was a jarring sight, in part because the Olympics are taking place only a few miles from the border that has divided the two Koreas since the United States and the Soviet Union accepted Japan's surrender as Korea's brutal colonial overlord in 1945. That history became a controversial topic when NBC had to fire one of its commentators after he outraged Koreans by speaking glowingly of Japan's contributions to Korea during that era.

But as Pence and Abe were trying to contain North Korea's so-called "charm offensive" to South Korean President Moon Jae-in, Yukio Hatoyama, one of Japan's few progressive leaders of the past 70 years, was in Washington to call for reducing US military forces in Okinawa and a more conciliatory approach to the regional tensions brought to a boil by Kim Jong-un's nuclear and missile program.

"Japan's role should be to create the conditions for North Korea to come to the negotiating table."
—former Japanese PM Yukio Hatoyama

"Japan's role should be to create the conditions for North Korea to come to the negotiating table" and not to increase the pressure, the former prime minister told *The Nation* in an exclusive interview. He also criticized Abe for supporting a three-way military alliance with South Korea and the United States, saying that most Koreans naturally oppose it because they "feel they were attacked by us in the past."

In Hatoyama's view, Japan instead should work with South Korea and China to convince the United States and North Korea to begin talks toward a peace treaty. That could be done, he said, through a proposal endorsed by China under which the North would halt its nuclear-weapons development in return for a postponement of the massive US-South Korean military exercises now scheduled for late March.

"Once a peace treaty is signed, there's no need to use nuclear weapons because there's no threat," he said. "I think the freeze would be enough for North Korea to start negotiating." His perspective is in stark contrast to Abe, who, while Pence was in Tokyo, avidly endorsed Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign of heavy sanctions backed by threats of US military strikes.

But Hatoyama's views are closely aligned with President Moon, whose insistence on diplomacy and engagement with the North paid off big-time when Kim dispatched his sister Kim Yo-jong, along with his grandfather's foreign minister and the current ceremonial head of state, Kim Yong-nam, to South Korea as the Olympics opened.

Kim Yo-jong, the first member of North Korea's ruling family to step foot in South Korea since the end of the Korean War in 1953, used her visit—which became a media and social-network sensation in Seoul—to the hilt. During her historic meeting with President Moon at the Blue House, she extended an invitation to the South Korean leader to visit Kim Jong-un in Pyongyang for a summit meeting.

If Moon accepts—and all indications at press time are that he will if he concludes the talks would help resolve the nuclear crisis—it would be Kim's first meeting with a foreign head of state since taking over from his father in 2011. And it would mark a huge triumph for Moon, who had hoped to use the Olympics as a springboard to trigger negotiations between North Korea and the United States to peacefully end the nuclear crisis.

But the inter-Korean diplomacy is viewed by both Trump and Abe as a challenge to their strategy to strangle North Korea economically and then use the powerful US military presence in Japan and South Korea—augmented by Japan's Self Defense Forces, as Pence breezily suggested to NBC—to force Kim to give up his weapons. The differences between the two approaches were starkly highlighted at the stunningly beautiful opening ceremonies on February 9.

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With millions of people watching, a stone-faced Pence, with Abe at his side, sat stiffly as the first united Korean Olympic team since 2006 marched into the stadium to thunderous roars from the crowd. To his right, just feet away in the reviewing stand, President Moon and his North Korean guests stood, waved, and cheered ecstatically. Pence's behavior—which was denounced by many Koreans as deeply insulting—underscored a deepening rift between the US-Japanese hard-line position and South Korea's long-term diplomatic strategy.

Just how much those divisions have hardened became clear on February 9, when Abe asked Moon to quickly resume the US-South Korean exercises that North Korea sees as deeply provocative and is one of the reasons for Pyongyang's nuclear-weapons program. Moon, whose government is considering another postponement—or perhaps a reduction in scale—of the drills after the Olympics as a way to maintain diplomatic momentum, coldly dismissed the suggestion, saying “the issue is about our sovereignty and [Japan's] intervention in our domestic affairs.”

In Washington, the US media framed the North-South diplomacy as a strategy designed in Pyongyang to divide Washington and Seoul, and ran extensive interviews with hard-line experts and former US officials warning Moon not to drift too far from the Trump-Abe policies. What happens after the Olympics, Daniel Russel, the former top Asia adviser to President Obama, told *The Washington Post*, “is going to be the sharp contrast between the charm offensive led by Kim Yo Jong and the spine-stiffening led by Vice President Pence.”

To Hatoyama, a longtime fixture in Japanese politics whose father was foreign minister during the 1970s and whose grandfather was prime minister in the 1950s, the forces arrayed against Moon are a stark reminder of the US pressure he came under when his Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) ruled from 2009 to 2012, in a brief respite from LDP control.

Just as Moon is seeking more independence by demanding that South Korea have a say in any use of military force against North Korea, Hatoyama came to office vowing to alter the terms of the US-Japan military alliance. Specifically, he wanted to make public the secret agreements the LDP had made with Washington—including allowing the US military to bring nuclear weapons in and out of Japan—and reduce the burden of the enormous complex of US bases in Okinawa.

In *The World According to US Empire*, a 2016 book based on US diplomatic cables obtained by WikiLeaks, my chapter on East Asia chronicled how the Obama administration successfully pressured Hatoyama to drop these policies. That was accomplished by dispatching senior diplomats and Pentagon officials to argue that Hatoyama's proposals threatened US national-security interests and the US-Japan military alliance itself.

The offensive was led by Kurt Campbell, the assistant secretary of state for East Asia and the Pacific, and Michèle Flournoy, the under secretary of defense for policy. In 2007, they co-founded the Center for a New American Security, a military think tank closely aligned with the Democratic Party that continues to play a key role in US policy in Asia (both are still on the board of directors, and Campbell is the chairman).

Their campaign began in June 2009. At the time, Hatoyama's DPJ was about to take over the government in parliamentary elections, and wanted to undo a massive alignment of US bases in Japan. That alignment had been agreed to several years earlier by the ruling LDP, in a pact to "transform" Japan's military into a more supportive adjunct to the Pentagon in US military operations abroad. "Of course, these initiatives didn't settle well with the US," Hatoyama told *The Nation*.

That response is spelled out in the WikiLeaks cables. "A defeat of LDP," a top diplomatic official wrote in a memo to Flournoy, "will introduce an element of uncertainty into our Alliance relations with Japan." He instructed her to meet with DPJ leaders "to re-enforce [the] importance of implementing the transformation and realignment agenda."

Once the DPJ took over, Campbell made many visits to Tokyo, primarily to persuade Hatoyama's government not to reverse an agreement with the LDP to reduce the US Marine presence at its primary Okinawa base in Futenma by allowing Washington to build a new facility at Henoko, which is further north on the island. Okinawans had demanded that Futenma be closed after years of violent crimes and rapes by US soldiers and accidents by US aircraft.

The WikiLeaks cables show that Campbell went so far as to tell DPJ officials that their demands on the secret agreements on nuclear weapons could "create a situation that would require the US to respond in a way unhelpful to the alliance." In another meeting on Okinawa, he said a DPJ proposal for the Marines to redeploy to Guam and leave Okinawa altogether "would not give the US military the flexibility and speed necessary to meet its Security Treaty obligations to Japan" or confront "the dramatic increase in China's military capabilities."

In his interview, Hatoyama recalled that Flournoy and Campbell only made their demands to his subordinates, not to him as prime minister. "Obama never requested me directly," he said. Instead, in a few brief meetings with the US president, Obama told him that any conclusions would be drawn from a US-Japan task force of diplomats and military officials created to deal with outstanding bilateral issues. And that's what he regrets "the most," he recalled.

Here's why. When the DPJ shocked the US government by taking power in 2009, Hatoyama tried valiantly to wrestle control of the state from Japan's powerful bureaucrats, who traditionally remain in place for years and often retire to take lucrative jobs in the industries they are supposed to

oversee. “We said this would be a politician-led administration,” he recalled. “That upset the bureaucrats, not only for this issue but for all others as well.”

That can be seen in their response to the DPJ’s security proposals. In an extraordinary admission, Hatoyama essentially blamed the bureaucrats for spiking his attempts to redefine the US-Japanese alliance. “In reality, LDP administrations were really moved by bureaucrats, who were the real operators,” Hatoyama said. “They were always trying to please the US, trying to guess what they wanted and acting proactively on that.”

One of their tactics, he said, included providing a “fake paper” to him about the strategic importance of the proposed new US base in Henoko; it supposedly claimed that all US bases had to be within 60 nautical miles of sites where the US military stages exercises. But when he as prime minister formally asked the Pentagon if it had a rule like that, “they said no,” he said.

“So what they did was submit a fake paper to a prime minister. And I don’t think it was done by the US at all—it was the bureaucrats, to please the US.” For that reason, “I shouldn’t have gone along” with Obama’s proposals to leave their discussions to the US-Japan task force, he said.

Hatoyama was pushed out after his government acceded to the US demand for the new base at Henoko in 2010, and the DPJ was later disbanded. Henoko is currently being expanded to include new runways that jut into a once-protected natural waterway. But it, too, has been the focus of daily protests and remains a key unresolved issue between Washington and Tokyo.

While in Washington, Hatoyama met with several top lawmakers, including Senators Dianne Feinstein and Bernie Sanders, to discuss the issue. “I’m hoping that opinions from the US might change the course of the government in Japan,” he said. “We need to listen to the voices of the local people.”

Abe, a right-winger whose grandfather, former Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi, hounded Korean independence fighters during World War II as a colonial official in Manchuria, was re-elected prime minister in 2012. He is now one of the longest-ruling leaders in Japan’s postwar history. Both he and the US government continue to insist that Henoko is the “only alternative” to the US base at Futenma.

And on Korea, Abe has become Trump’s closest ally in the North Korea crisis. Once the Olympics end, the interplay between Trump and Abe, on the one hand, and Trump and Moon Jae-in, on the other, will largely determine the course of US policy on North Korea.

Hatoyama is hoping that peace can win out. In contrast to what he calls Abe’s “ridiculous ambition” to be the first postwar prime minister to make Japan a military power, he would like to see Japan take a different road. “My definition of a strong politician is not someone who can create a military power,” he said. “It’s someone who can create an environment where you can work cooperatively with neighboring countries.”

So far in Korea, the engagement side seems to be winning. In a wrap-up of the first days of the Olympics, The New York Times concluded that Kim Yo-jong had clearly “outflanked” Vice President Pence “in the game of diplomatic image-making.” Possibly in response to that fiasco, Pence suggested to the Post on his return flight to Washington that the United States would be willing to talk to the North even while its pressure campaign was “ongoing.”

But the offer—which the *Post* called “an important change” in policy—looked more like Pence trying to overcome the ridicule he endured over his petulant behavior in Pyeongchang. That’s because he still said US economic and military policy won’t change “until [North Korea] takes clear steps toward

denuclearization.” To many analysts, that’s a nonstarter.

“As long as the United States insists on North Korea abandoning nuclear missiles altogether, it will be difficult to get North Korea to the negotiating table,” Hatoyama said.

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P.S.

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<https://www.thenation.com/article/mike-pence-and-japanese-leader-shinzo-abe-rain-on-south-koreas-olympics-parade/>

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