

# Tomorrow's Northeast Asia



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**Prospects for Emerging East Asian Cooperation  
and  
Implications for the United States**

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## PREFACE

The Korea Economic Institute (KEI) in Washington, D.C., in cooperation with the School of International Service (SIS) at American University, also in Washington, D.C., cosponsored an academic symposium at SIS on 20–22 October 2010 on “Tomorrow’s Northeast Asia.” This volume contains the papers that were presented at the symposium and subsequently refined.

The 2010 symposium focused on emerging and future challenges facing Northeast Asia. Papers and discussions fell under five broad topics:

- Prospects for emerging East Asian cooperation and implications for the United States
- The emerging role of South Korea on a global stage
- The future of energy security in Northeast Asia
- Engaging and transforming North Korea’s economy
- Finding room for a six-party solution to North Korea’s nuclear crisis.

The sponsors and authors welcome comments on the material in this volume. This is the 21st in a series of annual academic symposia on Asia-Pacific economic and security issues that bring together leading academics and policy professionals from throughout the region.

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*December 2010*



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# JAPANESE PERSPECTIVES ON THE SIX-PARTY TALKS AND THE NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR CRISIS

*Michael R. Auslin*

## ABSTRACT

Japan has been a core member of the six-party talks from their inception but has pursued its own set of interests that do not always align with other participants. The Japan–North Korean relationship contains unique elements, most notably the issue of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea, an issue that has been elevated by Tokyo policymakers to the core of Japan’s negotiating position. This has led Tokyo to marginalize itself from playing a more assertive role in the negotiations, even as Japanese diplomats felt left out of many of the major discussions held by U.S. officials during the Bush administration. Tokyo endeavors to remain a leading member of the six-party talks and often takes among the most aggressive lines toward North Korea, but it remains dissatisfied with the talks’ failure to address both the abductee issue and that of Pyongyang’s ballistic missile program, which directly threatens the Japanese home islands.

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*Michael R. Auslin is Director of Japan Studies and Resident Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. Research for this paper was conducted by Chihiro Ikegami, who also made important contributions to its initial drafting.*

## Introduction

China, South Korea, and the United States, in what has become a regular undertaking, have recently been consulting on restarting the six-party talks that have been stalled for more than a year and a half. This would mark the first attempt by the Obama administration to pursue a formal multilateral diplomatic approach to resolve the North Korean nuclear crisis. Yet, given the structure of the talks, the three countries can proceed only with the active participation of all six members. Perhaps the strongest holdout during the last few rounds of the talks was Japan, and it is unclear how Tokyo would respond to a resumption of the talks. Although Japan has remained notably silent these past months, it has played a defining role in the six-party talks since their inception in 2003 through its unique geographical position and human rights agenda.

### History of the Six-Party Talks: Japan's Role and Contribution

Despite having long-standing ties to Korea throughout its history, Japan was a secondary diplomatic player in the various dramas occurring among Korea, China, Russia, and the United States after World War II. For most of the Cold War and early post-Cold War era, Japanese involvement with North Korea centered on the employment of North Korean workers in Japan, limited trade in raw materials, and the *Fujisanmaru 18* incident in 1983 in which a Japanese cargo ship and its crew were detained in North Korea for several months under accusations of espionage. Lurking in the background, and soon to become perhaps the most important issue for the Japanese public, was the unresolved question of the abduction of potentially dozens of Japanese citizens from Japan during the 1970s and 1980s, ostensibly by agents of North Korea.

Yet as the key U.S. ally in Asia and the world's second-largest economy, Tokyo inevitably was drawn into various diplomatic initiatives, in part owing to its political influence but perhaps even more for its economic usefulness. Almost all of these initiatives have centered on the nuclear issues that affect the region and not on the narrow issues of concern to Japan. Nevertheless, Tokyo feels a particular affinity for getting involved in the nuclear crisis, not only because of the inherent threat a nuclear-capable North Korea poses but also in no small part because of the country's long-standing anti-nuclear weapons policy.

After North Korea announced its intention to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1993, the United States, South Korea, and Japan began meeting on an ad hoc basis to discuss policy toward North Korea. After the signing of the Agreed Framework in October 1994 and the Korean Penin-

sula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), Japan slowly became more involved in North Korean nuclear issues, in no small part because of agreeing to pay for 20–25 percent of the \$4 billion cost of building a light water reactor (LWR) for North Korea. This beneficence gave Japan a stake in the outcome of the agreement and allowed it to leverage its economic position and alliance with the United States into a more prominent regional role. As this role developed, Japan came to clarify its interests in participating in North Korean issues, primarily from the perspective of enhancing its nonproliferation policies and working to achieve a denuclearized world.

Yet these aspirations were not the only motive in Japan's participation in North Korean diplomatic initiatives. Starting in 1996, officials from Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo formalized their ad hoc meetings into a regular set of consultations, but it took a crisis to create the formal precursor to the six-party talks, what became known as the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG). As North Korea developed its military technology and became more militarily capable, Japanese and regional security began to be more threatened. Thus, military and security issues became as important a factor in Japanese calculations as did earlier, more purely diplomatic goals. The true turning point came on 31 August 1998 when North Korea launched the Taepo-dong 1 ballistic missile over Japanese territory. For the first time, Japanese policymakers felt a direct threat from North Korea that was of a strategic nature. Given the leap of technological capability that the Taepo-dong represented, South Korea and the United States were as concerned as Japan with the potential destabilization of Northeast Asia.

In response, Tokyo held summits and high-level talks with Washington and Seoul within a month, marking the beginning of the Perry Process (named for Secretary of Defense William Perry) and Japan's close cooperation with the United States and South Korea on North Korean issues. From 1996 through 2003, TCOG meetings helped unify the three nations' policies toward North Korea, building confidence among the three participants although not resulting in any formal, joint demands on North Korea. At the same time as the diplomatic process was gaining steam, the growing North Korean threat served to enhance Japan's relationship with the United States as the two agreed to work more closely together on developing missile defense technology and conducting joint testing and ultimately deployment of such systems. Yet even in the heyday of TCOG, Japan's intention to retain its overriding interest in a multilateral format to solve these issues was clear from the start, with the then foreign minister, Masahiko Komura, stressing the need for deepened relationships with China, South Korea, and Russia to "create a stable environment" with which to face

North Korea (KNI 1999). This eventually would be one of the influences leading to the six-party-talks format.

At the same time, however, Tokyo also reached out directly to the Kim Jong-il regime in Pyongyang, attempting to solve this crisis through bilateral channels, including summits and ministerial-level talks during the next four years. From North Korea's perspective, its sparking of a security crisis resulted in far more high-level attention from Japan as well as a Japanese willingness to discuss the full range of diplomatic topics. Although Japan's policy was not as far-reaching as the contemporaneous Sunshine Policy of South Korea's Kim Dae-jung, Japanese leaders placed great emphasis on a series of normalization negotiations held during 2000. During these talks, both countries' positions on normalization were made clear to each other for the first time since negotiations had stopped abruptly in 1992 after the North Korean delegation walked out of talks. It was during these talks that Japan reaffirmed the cardinal importance of the abduction issue, which has framed policy toward North Korea ever since. The normalization discussions thus were significant because they set the requirements for reshaping Japan–North Korea ties that have been maintained to this day, notably that Japan will not normalize until the abduction and missile issues are resolved and that North Korea's emphasis is on the "settlement of the past," in other words, issues stemming from World War II and Japan's colonial past.

Another important lead-up to the six-party talks was the September 2002 visit to Pyongyang of the then prime minister, Junichiro Koizumi. This produced the stunning admission by Kim Jong-il that North Korea had abducted Japanese citizens, giving long-awaited credence to those who had accused the North of the heinous action and providing at least some measure of relief for Japanese family members who had long wondered what had happened to their loved ones. On top of this, and more significant in terms of the multilateral diplomatic agenda, Koizumi publicly called for a multilateral dialogue among China, Japan, North Korea, Russia, South Korea, and the United States, which helped further initiate the momentum toward the six-party talks. Furthermore, the Pyongyang Declaration, which outlined the requirements and process for reconciliation as well as confirmed compliance with international law and cooperation, was signed at this meeting. This document has since been invoked as a guideline and standard at Japanese–North Korean bilateral talks as well as Japanese–North Korean dialogue in the context of larger multilateral discussions.

The momentum for the formation of the six-party talks increased exponentially after North Korea officially withdrew from the NPT in January 2003. With the TCOG process losing momentum, the George W. Bush administration shifted

its focus to a broader multilateral format. The fact that Japan's numerous calls for an expanded multilateral approach were ignored until 2003 pointed out the limitations of Tokyo's influence. It was only when the Bush administration, already saddled with the war in Afghanistan and moving rapidly toward the invasion of Iraq, decided to throw its weight behind a new format that such an approach became a reality.

Yet even in this changed diplomatic environment Japan suddenly found itself sidelined. The immediate forerunner to the six-party talks was the three-party talks among China, North Korea, and the United States, held in April 2003. These talks originated out of the U.S. refusal to hold bilateral negotiations with North Korea because of its violation of the 1994 Agreed Framework. Despite Tokyo's anger at being left out of the initial meetings, the months following saw a flurry of diplomatic activity among the six parties, paving the way for multiparty dialogue until North Korea announced its willingness to partake in six-party talks in late July; the first round of the six-party talks were held in August of that same year.

### **Japan and the Six-Party Talks**

During the five-and-a-half years of multiple rounds of the six-party talks, Japan has been deeply involved in the process yet has brought to the table its own set of concerns. Three major areas have ordered the Japanese approach: maintaining a presence in the multilateral negotiations, resolving the issue of the abductees, and achieving broader denuclearization goals. Tokyo has not taken a leadership role in the talks and at times has found itself diplomatically isolated because of domestic political pressures, yet it remains a core member of the talks and an important diplomatic ally of the United States in this process.

Of overriding importance to Japan has been the issue of the abduction of its citizens by North Korea. For Tokyo, one of the biggest benefits of the six-party talks was the opportunity to promote the abduction issue in the international community. Japan succeeded in making the issue an international one, with notable victories that included the adoption of the resolution by the UN Commission on Human Rights that contained a clause on the abduction issue as a violation of human rights, the testimony at a U.S. congressional hearing of abductee Yokota Megumi's family and a meeting with President George W. Bush, and the inclusion of the abduction issue in UN Security Council resolutions adopted as a result of North Korea's missile launches and nuclear tests.

At the same time, however, the abduction issue has hindered Japan not only in its relations with North Korea but also in its efforts to play an effective role in the six-party talks, in which coordination with the other nations is crucial. Japan's relations with North Korea have been directly correlated with the status of the abduction issue: on one hand, Kim's apology and recognition of North Korean involvement in the abductions was followed by the signing of the Pyongyang Declaration and normalization talks; on the other hand, the discovery that the alleged remains of Yokota Megumi belonged to another individual initiated the rapid deterioration of Japan–North Korea relations. Thus, even though the joint statement of the six-party talks calls for the normalization of Japan–North Korea relations, Japan's insistence on the abduction issue has obstructed the realization of this goal.

Perhaps even more important, the abduction issue has affected Japan's ability to act in concert with the other members of the six-party talks. Because of the status of the abduction issue, Japan did not participate in the collective emergency energy assistance agreed upon in the "Initial Actions for the Implementation of the Joint Statement." By following its own specific agenda, Japan has found it difficult to maintain a united front with China, Russia, South Korea, and the United States in the nations' efforts to solve the issues of the Korean peninsula.

In contrast, Japan has taken a proactive and leading role in diplomatic efforts to denuclearize the Korean peninsula, and Japan has demonstrated a willingness to act when North Korea has not followed its international obligations. Even though it is not a permanent United Nations Security Council member, Japan was an active, driving force in proposing and negotiating for the three Security Council resolutions (1695, 1718, and 1874) adopted with regard to North Korea's missile launches and nuclear tests, and Japan drafted Resolution 1695 and cosponsored Resolution 1874. Japan worked especially closely with the United States to push for a reference to Chapter 7 of the UN Charter that authorizes the use of force or economic sanctions. Moreover, Japan was also quick to implement these sanctions, directly through new domestic legislation—the North Korea Human Rights Law (June 2006)—as well as indirectly through laws such as the Law on Liability for Oil Pollution Damage (amended March 2005). Japan also showed no hesitation in extending sanctions in April 2008 when there had been no concrete results. Japan's strong stance against North Korean missile and nuclear development is a direct reflection of Japan's awareness, in both the government and public opinion, of its vulnerability in the face of such weapons. An editorial in *Yomiuri Shimbun* (2005) summarized the sentiment well, announcing that if North Korea developed a missile to carry nuclear weapons "no other nation would face a more horrendous threat than Japan."



Connected with this, Japan has used the six-party talks to spur the broader nonproliferation goals that it has championed for years. Although a separate issue from denuclearization, nonproliferation has come to be a primary security concern of the United States and Japan. The importance Tokyo attaches to nonproliferation goals is reflected not only in UN sanctions that Japan has pushed but also in Tokyo's participation in the Bush administration's Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), including maritime exercises and information sharing among PSI-cooperating governments. Tokyo sees these activities, separate from but related to the six-party talks, as a demonstration of its commitment to global nonproliferation, giving extra weight to its moralistic take on global denuclearization.

Finally, the six-party talks have been a forum for Japan to demonstrate its close coordination with the United States and South Korea. This has become an important international activity for Tokyo, which has been seeking to maintain its influence in the region and play a larger diplomatic role on the world stage. Tokyo was left out of the first four-party talks among the United States, China, South Korea, and North Korea even though it was directly affected by advances in North Korean military capabilities. Given its alliance relationship with Washington and the millions in overseas aid it has donated throughout Asia, Tokyo expects to be treated as a regional power on a par with other leading nations. Moreover, Tokyo has been watching China's rise with a wary eye for the last decade, and Japan's inclusion in the six-party talks as an equal member gives Japan some level of assurance that China will not be solely dominating the regional agenda in security and political issues.

Since their cooperation for KEDO in 1995, Japan, South Korea, and the United States (out of the five nations besides North Korea at the six-party talks) have been a more tightly aligned group than any other. Since the early rounds of the six-party talks, they have been unified in requiring complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement of all North Korean nuclear programs; they also later affirmed explicitly that a LWR would be discussed only after North Korea had abandoned its nuclear programs and returned to the NPT and the International Atomic Energy Agency. Furthermore, when U.S. intelligence detected activity in North Korea's Musudan-ri missile test site in May 2006, Japan and South Korea were the first to be contacted, and Japanese information sharing has been the most active among these three members. Japan has had the most bilateral and trilateral meetings with South Korea and the United States, and each meeting has led to the affirmation of the importance of their solidarity. Fully aware that unilateral Japanese action will have a limited effect on North Korea, Japanese

media have echoed this sentiment, highlighting the importance of the partnership with its two biggest allies in the six-party talks.

### **Shortcomings of the Six-Party Talks and Future Japanese Approaches**

As involved as it has been with the six-party-talks process from the beginning, Tokyo has also voiced frustration, sometimes extreme, with the talks. One issue that has constantly bothered diplomats is the lack of a focus on North Korea's ballistic missile program. It is this military capability that directly threatens Japan, and only Japan has faced the indignity of having North Korea shoot ballistic missiles over or toward its territory on numerous occasions. Tokyo has had to turn to the UN for sanctions against North Korea's ballistic missile activities, which has provided a worldwide forum to highlight Pyongyang's aggressive behavior, but it has also meant that in the most sustained forum for dealing with the North, that is, the six-party talks, there has been no formal approach to countering the most immediate threat Japan faces.

Yet the UN sanctions have been watered down by repeated opposition from China and Russia as well as a lack of uniform compliance with the demands that member states cut off aid to North Korea that could be used in its military program. Given these failures, Tokyo has focused on intensifying its bilateral cooperation with the United States on anti-ballistic missile technology and testing, leading since 2008 to three successful antimissile tests jointly with the U.S. Navy. Japan has bolstered its fleet of Aegis-capable destroyers, installed land-based PAC-3 antimissile batteries on the home islands, and cooperated with the U.S. Army in installing advanced X-band radar systems. At one level, then, Japan and the United States have used the growing confidence in their anti-ballistic missile capabilities to pressure North Korea into abandoning confrontational behavior and returning to the negotiating table.

Tokyo also is determined not to let negotiators from the Barack Obama administration ignore Japanese concerns and cut it out of the loop, as did the Bush administration assistant secretary of state, Christopher Hill. Tokyo was incensed at Hill's repeated concessions to Pyongyang, without prior consultation, as well as his lack of support for pressuring North Korea to resolve the abductee issue. Tokyo found itself having to support U.S. negotiating positions without having had any input into their formulation; if Japan hadn't done so, it would have risked being further isolated from Washington and Seoul. Thus, the new director-general for Asian and Oceanic affairs, Akitaka Saiki, has been in constant contact with the U.S. special envoy to North Korea, Stephen Bosworth, while foreign ministers

Hirofumi Nakasone and Katsuya Okada have met multiple times with Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Ambassador Bosworth. With the support of Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell, the Obama administration has appeared so far to include Tokyo in all discussions related to the possible resumption of the talks. Given the overall dearth of activity on that front, however, it is not hard to coordinate messages. The real test will come if and when the talks resume, and the U.S. negotiator will be pressed hard by North Korean officials to cut side deals that conform to Pyongyang's interests.

For all this, however, Japan has not taken a leadership role in the talks. It has been content to be involved as a core member and has frankly expressed its dissatisfaction with the Bush administration's conciliatory approach. Nevertheless, Tokyo has repeatedly reaffirmed the basic goals of the talks without proposing any new initiatives either to get the talks restarted, to break logjams, or to create a more unified mind-set among China, the United States, and South Korea. In this sense, Tokyo's participation has been passive, reflecting the limitations to its regional influence and the constraining nature of its alliance with Washington. Japanese leaders, who feel a direct threat from North Korea's missile program, cannot accept being excluded from the six-party-talks process, yet they find that they cannot promote their major concerns (that is, abductees and missiles) and move them to the forefront of the diplomatic agenda.

Japan's limited influence over U.S. policy formation is paralleled by its lack of leadership vis-à-vis China. Given Washington's insistence that Beijing can exert sufficient pressure on Pyongyang to get it to fulfill its six-party agreements, Japan has little choice but to follow the U.S. lead in enticing President Hu Jintao to turn the screws on Kim Jong-il. This has led to Japanese diplomats holding repeated meetings with their Chinese counterparts, only to issue recycled statements of "concern" over North Korea's nuclear program and demands that Pyongyang live up to promises it made in earlier rounds of the talks. Tokyo has been as unable as Washington to get Beijing to put more pressure on North Korea; neither has it been able to highlight China's lack of enthusiasm for the process or lack of success in holding the North to its agreements. This has pervaded even the highest-level meetings, such as the Japan-China meeting between Foreign Minister Hirofumi Nakasone and Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi in March 2009, when the two simply agreed to keep in close contact regarding the potential upcoming launch of a North Korean Taepo-dong 2 missile and asserted that no party should do anything to aggravate the situation. The fact that this meeting occurred six years after the initiation of the process underscores how little influence any of the regional actors seem to have on Pyongyang.

This raises a deeper question that Japanese leaders as well as their counterparts need to consider: How long will they continue to pursue the six-party-talks format despite its lack of success? No Japanese diplomat has suggested ending the talks or has hinted that Japan would sit out any future meetings, no matter how dissatisfied Japan is with the process. Yet, clearly, the key Japanese goals of getting a full resolution of the abductee issue and achieving the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, let alone the ancillary goals of stopping the North's ballistic missile program and preventing any further proliferation of materials for weapons of mass destruction, are far from being realized. The North has perfected the tactic of withdrawing from the talks, making threatening actions, then listing new demands for its willingness to negotiate again and live up to prior promises. While this drama stretches out over years, the North continues to refine its nuclear and missile capabilities.

Japan, along with its ally the United States and partner South Korea, must decide whether the six-party talks continue to serve any useful purpose. The threat to Japan from North Korea has not receded but instead has intensified in recent years. Japan's influence with Pyongyang, as well as with its partners, has not grown, and Japanese diplomats have not made any significant contributions to moving the process forward. Nor have U.S. or South Korean, let alone Chinese, diplomats reached out to Tokyo to take a leadership role or to ask Japan for new thoughts on revitalizing the process. It would appear that this is a case of a negotiating trap for Japan and all the participants, whereby it is extremely difficult to stop a diplomatic process, even one that is failing, once it has been institutionalized. At this point, only an outbreak of conflict or regime change in North Korea is likely to put to rest once and for all further attempts to resuscitate the six-party process.

All that being said, Japan's position in the six-party talks has been unique, as Japan is simultaneously one of the nations with a tougher stance toward North Korea and also one of the most vulnerable to its missile and nuclear threats. Having implemented what *Japan Times* calls the "last effective measure" available to the Japanese government in June 2009 after North Korea's latest nuclear test, Japan knows that the only current channels left for solving the issues surrounding the Korean peninsula are multilateral, namely the six-party talks and the UN Security Council (Hongo 2009). It is unlikely that these channels will actually result in the outcome preferred by Japanese leaders, but those leaders find themselves with little choice but to reaffirm their close ties with the United States and Japan's desire to continue the six-party talks, given that the U.S.-Japan alliance will continue to be the ultimate guarantor of Japanese security, especially with a nuclear weapons-capable North Korea.

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## **Finding Room for a Six Party Solution to North Korea's Nuclear Crisis**

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