

ABE PLAYS THE NORTH KOREA CARD

By Dennis Halpin

There is diplomatic movement afoot in East Asia that is a bit out of the ordinary. Regional leaders have shown reluctance as of late to sit down with each other. South Korea's President Park Geun-hye, however, did garner an early [invitation to meet](#) with Chinese President Xi Jinping. But Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has been largely shut out from the usual round of shuttle diplomacy between East Asian capitals. All that could soon come to an end.

Abe did finally get to sit with Park at the recently completed Nuclear Security Summit in The Hague—although President Obama sat between them at the [“trilateral meeting”](#) to give the South Korean President cover with her domestic constituency. The need to demonstrate allied solidarity on continued North Korean provocations was the rationale for the get-together. Despite this display, Park, sent a clear message that history questions were still on the table by thanking Xi Jinping at an [earlier meeting in The Hague](#) for Beijing's decision to construct a memorial hall in Harbin to Korean independence fighter Ahn Jung-geun.

Ironically, given the current political tensions in the region, Abe could end up having his first bilateral East Asian summit with none other than North Korea's Kim Jong Un—neither of whom have yet been invited to Beijing, though for entirely different reasons. In Abe's case, the Chinese snub has to do with territorial disputes and history. Kim Jong Un finds himself in the Chinese doghouse for being the “Peck's Bad Boy” of Northeast Asia, conducting missile and nuclear tests. The recent [shooting of a short-range missile](#) in the flight path of a civilian Chinese airliner certainly did not endear Kim to Beijing. Thus, making common cause for this Asian odd couple does, at present, make diplomatic sense.

This is despite the fact that Abe and Kim come from different ends of the political spectrum. Abe's overtures to Pyongyang do not, in fact, signal any lessening of his placing a priority on national security issues, including North Korean nuclear and missile program development. In fact, on April 5, Japanese [government sources were quoted](#) stating, “Japan will strike any North Korean ballistic missile that threatens to hit Japan in the coming weeks after Pyongyang recently fired medium-range missiles.” Japanese Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera reportedly issued the order. However, he did not make an official announcement on missile intercept, so as not to put a chill on the delicate ongoing Tokyo-Pyongyang negotiations on abductions and other humanitarian issues.

Abe is recognized for [making his political name](#), over a decade ago, as a leading advocate for the families of Japanese abductees forcibly taken to North Korea in the 1970s and 1980s. He was a behind-the-scenes actor, as Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary, in the summit between Prime Minister Koizumi and Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang in 2002. That meeting is well remembered not only for Kim's official admission of Japanese abductions, but also for the return, in a rather convoluted manner, of five of the abductees to Japan. (They were to go back to North Korea after a brief visit but, after their arrival, decided to stay.) The five abductees were followed, in due course, by not only their children, but [in the case of Hitomi Soga](#), by a spouse—US army deserter Charles Robert Jenkins. Now, over a decade later, Tokyo may again be on the road to Pyongyang.

There are a number of concrete signals of a potential Tokyo-Pyongyang thaw. Last year, soon after entering office, Abe sent his unofficial advisor Isao Iijima on a [secret spring visit to Pyongyang](#), a move that [reportedly caught US officials](#), including US Special Representative for North Korea Policy Glyn Davies, by surprise. A

reportedly irked Seoul was also largely kept in the dark. Iijima's visit was seen as accomplishing little beyond a meeting with Kim Yong Nam, North Korea's titular number two leader at that time.

However, it was reported that the [recent meeting in Mongolia](#) between the parents and daughter of well-known abductee [Megumi Yokota](#), "was also made possible after Mr. Isao Iijima's visit to North Korea in May last year." It was also noted that Tokyo and Pyongyang are now negotiating for a possible future visit of Megumi's daughter, Kim Eun Kyung, to Japan later this year.

Should that take place, it would be an electrifying diplomatic breakthrough in the sad saga of Megumi Yokota, a then 13-year-old school girl who was snatched away by North Korean frogmen in a Japanese coastal city in 1977. Megumi's parents have lived every parent's worst nightmare for more than three decades.

Megumi's mother, Sakie Yokota, told a visiting US Congressional staff delegation in Tokyo in October 2012, how she still held out hope that her daughter was alive, despite Pyongyang's claims to the contrary, and how much she wanted to meet her granddaughter before she died. She said, however, that she would never meet her granddaughter in North Korea, but only in a third country where she would not be made use of by Pyongyang's propaganda. True to her word, she and her husband traveled in March of this year to Ulan Bator, Mongolia, for the historic meeting. The meeting was "a dream come true," the [grandparents told the press](#) after their return to Japan. "She looked very similar to what Megumi looked like."

Iijima was reportedly in [China in late October 2013](#), dallying further with the North Koreans in Dalian, where he engaged in "delicate negotiations." Whatever the extent of the contact, Iijima's shuttle diplomacy seems to have borne further fruit as the Red Cross organizations of the two countries [met in the Chinese city of Shenyang](#) on March 3, 2014. The parties convened ostensibly to [discuss the return](#) of the remains of Japanese soldiers and other

citizens who died in North Korea during the Second World War. They also, however, likely revisited the abduction issue.

Diplomats from the two sides then met on the sidelines of a second [Red Cross meeting in Shenyang](#), held March 19-20. There they brokered an agreement to reconvene intergovernmental talks, suspended since November 2012, on March 30-31, 2014 in Beijing. On March 29, Song Il Ho, North Korea's Ambassador for normalization talks with Japan, [arrived in Beijing](#) for the talks. During that session, Tokyo's envoy, Junichi Ihara, raised Pyongyang's recent [launch of two inter-range ballistic missiles](#) as well as the abduction issue. On the latter, he reportedly told the North Koreans that Japan is ready to consider lifting sanctions if Pyongyang agrees to reexamine the issue.

Kim Jong Un's motives in pursuing his own Japan strategy are rather transparent. First, there has been a lack of any breakthrough in negotiations with Washington. Anticipated trips to North Korea by Robert King, US Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues, to negotiate the release of US citizen Kenneth Bae, have been [rebuffed at least twice](#). There are also continued reports of North Korean resentment of Chinese influence and commercial penetration. Kim's uncle, Jang Song Thaek, was executed last year for numerous alleged crimes including the underpricing overseas of "[coal and other precious underground resources](#)" and of land within a special economic zone—a not very veiled criticism of Chinese mercantile practices with regard to North Korea.

Kim Jong Un has also apparently recognized the importance of Megumi Yokota's daughter as a bargaining chip in his ongoing diplomacy with Tokyo. South Korean abductee family representative Choi Seong-ryong [reported in August 2012](#) that he had received information that Kim Jong Un's trusted younger sister, Kim Yeo Jong, had been put in charge of protecting and managing the affairs of Kim Eun Kyung. Choi further revealed that the two women [studied computer science together](#) at Kim Il Sung University and now work together "at a core organization"

in Pyongyang. “The leader’s sister is taking care of her,” Choi said. He added that Kim Eun Kyung does not want to return permanently to Japan because she has been thoroughly “brainwashed” by the communist state.

And then there is the obvious carrot for Kim Jong Un of [Japanese economic assistance](#) first discussed at the Koizumi-Kim summit in 2002. Some might criticize any pledge by Tokyo of bilateral assistance at this stage as breaking solidarity on North Korean sanctions when Washington and Seoul are holding to a hardline stance for [beginning steps toward CVID](#) (complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement) of North Korea’s nuclear program before any reconvening of the Six Party Talks, of which Japan is a member.

The Abe administration has, however, little to apologize for in pursuing an issue of utmost importance to the Japanese people. And Washington can say little about “abductee diplomacy” given the fact that it reneged on a commitment to its ally Japan in 2008 on this very same issue. Beginning with statements made by Cofer Black, the Ambassador-at-Large for Counter-terrorism in the first George W. Bush Administration, Washington had clearly indicated that the abduction issue would be given due consideration before any action was taken to remove North Korea from the State Department list of state sponsors of terrorism. For example, in Congressional testimony in April 2004, Black stated that the abduction issue is “[one of the most important](#)” elements in the designation of North Korea as a terrorism-sponsoring state.

However, in pursuit of a verbal deal worked out by then lead-North Korea negotiator, Ambassador Christopher Hill, with his North Korean counterpart in the summer of 2008, it was decided that North Korea would be [removed from the terrorism list](#) in exchange for what proved to be an empty promise by Pyongyang to enter into a transparent verification process for denuclearization. Tokyo was told with little forewarning that North Korea would soon be off the list, as happened in October 2008, with the complete delinking of the abduction issue from North Korea’s support for terrorism.

In December 2008, Pyongyang, having gotten what it wanted by being taken off the terrorism list, not surprisingly, [reneged on its verbal assurances](#) concerning denuclearization and the entire Six Party process collapsed. After nearly six years, the Six Party Talks have yet to resume, but Pyongyang remains off the terrorism list, even after the bloody purge of Jang Song Thaek.

As a result, it would be rather presumptuous to try to second guess Tokyo on its “abductee diplomacy.” Abe has chosen to play the North Korea card to not only send a signal that he will not be diplomatically isolated but also to hopefully resolve, once and for all, a critical human rights issue that has haunted Japan for over a decade.

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