Japan’s policy on North Korea: four motives and three factors
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ABSTRACT

Background: The central model of Japan’s North Korea policy has been maintained consistently despite repeated changes in the government from the Liberal Democratic Party to the Democratic Party and back again.

Purpose: This paper summarizes Japan’s policy concerning North Korea after the Cold War, examines the structure of this policy, and, based on this structure, analyzes Japan’s current policy regarding North Korea. The analysis then turns to the future.

Main Argument: Normalizing relations between Japan and North Korea may be the primary goal of Japan’s policy, but the following four motives can also be identified. First, for Japan, the normalization of relations with North Korea is significant as a remaining postwar process. The second motive involves responses to security issues. Third, there is the issue of the safety of Japanese lives. Fourth, Japan’s economic opportunities in North Korea must be considered. Japan has sought ties with North Korea with these four motives, which will remain unchanged in the future. However, Japan does not aim to normalize relations with North Korea without restrictions, and Japan’s policy concerning North Korea is bound by the following three factors. The first factor is the international environment. Second, Japan–North Korea relations are constrained by the attitude of South Korea. Third, Japan’s domestic politics also determine Japan’s North Korea policy.

Conclusion: While the four motives will remain the same for Japan, these three factors determine Japan’s attitude toward North Korea, all three of which are pushing for Japan to negotiate with North Korea. The central model of Japan’s North Korea policy has been maintained consistently despite repeated changes in the government from the Liberal Democratic Party to the Democratic Party and back again. This paper summarizes Japan’s policy concerning North Korea after the Cold War, examines the structure of this policy, and, based on this structure, analyzes Japan’s current policy regarding North Korea. The analysis then turns to the future. Normalizing relations between Japan and North Korea may be the primary goal of Japan’s policy, but the following four motives can also be identified. First, for Japan, the normalization of relations with North Korea is significant as a remaining postwar process. The second motive involves responses to security issues. Third, there is the issue of the safety of Japanese lives. Fourth, Japan’s economic opportunities in North Korea must be considered. Japan has sought ties with North Korea with these four motives, which will remain unchanged in the future. However, Japan does not aim to

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normalize relations with North Korea without restrictions, and Japan’s policy concerning North Korea is bound by the following three factors. The first factor is the international environment. Second, Japan–North Korea relations are constrained by the attitude of South Korea. Third, Japan’s domestic politics also determine Japan’s North Korea policy. While the four motives will remain the same for Japan, these three factors determine Japan’s attitude toward North Korea, all three of which are pushing for Japan to negotiate with North Korea.

1. Introduction

This paper summarizes Japan’s policy concerning North Korea after the Cold War, examines the structure of this policy, and, based on this structure, analyzes Japan’s current policy regarding North Korea. The analysis then turns to the future.

After the end of the Cold War, Japan attempted to form a full-fledged relationship with North Korea. Due to their originally similar communist parties, the relationship between Japan and North Korea during the Cold War was established by the Japanese Communist Party, but North Korea’s attempt to infiltrate Seoul and attack the presidential residence in 1968 was opposed by the Japanese Communist Party, leading to a gradual distancing between the countries. As a result, from around the 1970s, the Social Democratic Party of Japan partnered with North Korea\(^1\) During the Cold War, the ruling party in Japan had no relationship with North Korea.

After the Cold War ended, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party began negotiations to normalize diplomatic relations with North Korea, which became a model for Japan’s later North Korea policy. Furthermore, in 2002, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi made his first visit to North Korea as premier of Japan and held talks with North Korea’s Supreme Leader Kim Jong Il, the chairman of state affairs, and the Japan–North Korea Pyongyang Declaration adopted at the time has been the foundation of subsequent relations between the two countries. In addition, as Japanese public opinion was sharply opposed to the North Korean response to the abduction issue, this has become a major point that is invariably scrutinized when considering Japan’s policy on North Korea. The model of Japan’s North Korea policy formed in this way has been consistently maintained despite the repeated changes in government from the Liberal Democratic Party to the Democratic Party and back again.

Indeed, there is no doubt that the biggest variable in Japan’s policy on North Korea is the stance of North Korea itself, but this paper aims to organize the structure that defines Japan’s policy on North Korea and examine the future of Japan’s North Korea policy.

2. Japan’s North Korea policy: four motivations

Naturally, the neighboring Korean Peninsula is important to Japan. In addition, given that the Korean Peninsula is divided, Japan’s approach toward the two administrations on the peninsula, South Korea and North Korea, must differ from

\(^1\)Takasaki, Kensho Niccho Kosho, 18.
its approach toward ordinary countries and regions. Japan had normal diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1965, but none with North Korea. Regarding North Korea, the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan states that “Japan seeks to normalize its relations with North Korea, in accordance with the Japan-DPRK Pyongyang Declaration, through comprehensively resolving outstanding issues of concern such as the abductions, nuclear and missile issues as well as settlement of the unfortunate past.” Normalizing relations between Japan and North Korea may be the overarching goal of Japan’s policy on North Korea, but the following four motives can also be identified.

First, for Japan, the normalization of relations with North Korea is significant as a remaining postwar process. As is well known, the two political regimes on the Korean Peninsula – South Korea and North Korea – are divided states. Japan normalized diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1965 when the Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea was signed. Under this treaty, the Japanese government recognized South Korea as “the only lawful government in Korea.” Although this recognition received strong resistance from factions such as the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan and the Socialist Party of Japan, who wanted Japan to seek diplomatic relations with North Korea, Prime Minister Eisaku Satō pushed it through the Diet.

At the time, Prime Minister Eisaku Satō said, “The relationship with North Korea is a blank slate.” Despite considering South Korea as “the only legal government on the Korean Peninsula,” the Japanese government left open the possibility of normalizing relations with North Korea in the event of changes in the state of affairs. Although the basic stance of political parties toward North Korea varies because North Korea is a communist state, the normalization of relations with North Korea is a challenge that Japan must achieve regardless of the political party in power.

Furthermore, while there is no doubt that Japanese politicians bear a moral responsibility for the Japanese colonial rule before World War II, their ambitions to provide

\[2\] Japan-North Korean Relations,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, last modified November 20 2015, https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/n_korea/relation.html.

\[3\] Former Ambassador Tetsuya Endo, who led the Japanese delegation in the negotiation to normalize the Japan–North Korea relations, has cited two unsolved issues in the postwar process: the conclusion of the Japan–Russia Peace Treaty upon the resolution of the Northern Territories issue and the normalization of the relationship with North Korea. Tetsuya Endo, “Nichokankankei no Tembo: Kokkou Seijouka Kosho wo Chushinni (The prospect for the Japan–North Korea relationship: Focusing on the negotiation to normalize the relationship)” https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/jaesjb/50/6/50_346/_article/-char/ja/.

\[4\] The General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Chongryon) was opposed to the normalization of Japan’s relationship with South Korea, as it insisted on the legitimacy of North Korea. With the normalization of the Japan–South Korea relations, the Japanese government started to work on terminating the agreement on the repatriation of Koreans from Japan with the Korean Red Cross of 1959, and the agreement expired in 1967. It is fair to say that the major reason the Chongryon was opposed to the normalization of the Japan–South Korea relationship was the difficulty in continuing the repatriation scheme as a result. For more details, see Yoshiaki Kikuchi, Kita Chosen Kikoku Jigyou no Kenkyu: Reisenka no “Iminteki Kikan” to Niccho Nikkan Kankei (A Study on the Repatriation to North Korea: “The Migrants’ Return’ and Japan–North Korea and Japan-South Korea Relations under Cold War), (2020, Akashi-Shoten), 402–407.

\[5\] Prime Minister Sato speaking to the Special Committee on Japan-Republic of Korean Relations Treaty at House of Councillors,” National Diet of Japan, December 26 1965, https://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/#/detail?minId=105014958X00519651126.

\[6\] For example, Article 2 of the Japan-DPRK Pyongyang Declaration between Prime Minister Koizumi and Chairman Kim Jong-II of the DPRK Defense Commission states: 2. The Japanese side regards, in a spirit of humility, the facts of history that Japan caused tremendous damage and suffering to the people of Korea through its colonial rule in the past, and expressed deep remorse and heartfelt apology. https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/n_korea/pmv0209/pyongyang.html.
Japan with a more active role in international society by putting a complete end to World War II must be noted. This can be seen in former Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone’s “final settlement of post-war politics” and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s “escape from the postwar regime,” which he advocated in his first premiership.

Second, security issues must be addressed. North Korea must be considered in the process of achieving peace and stability in Northeast Asia. Japan first recognized North Korea as a threat to its national security after the launch of the Taepodong I in August 1998. North Korea insisted that it had launched a satellite for space exploration, but a projectile that flew over the Japanese archipelago without advanced notice was inappropriate in reference to international law. This effectively meant that North Korea had acquired ballistic missile technology and had a clear capability to attack Japan. Since then, North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs have been considered to pose a direct threat to Japan. North Korea has sought to improve its missile technology concurrently with its nuclear program, claiming that it succeeded in launching an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) in November 2017 for which the entire United States was in range, and it succeeded in miniaturizing in September of the same year. North Korea thus gained nuclear leverage over the United States, which served as the basis of the US–North Korea talks in 2018–19. North Korea’s nuclear and missile issues at the global level are undoubtedly important to Japan, but the fact that North Korea has already deployed short-range ballistic missiles with the entire Japanese archipelago in range is an even bigger problem. Japan needs to remove the threat posed by North Korea’s short- and medium-range ballistic missiles.

Additionally, not only is North Korea a security threat to Japan, but the Korean Peninsula carries significance due to its relationship with China, which is now the second-largest political, military, and economic power after the United States and has enormous influence in Northeast Asia. It is, of course, necessary for Japan to maintain a good relationship with China, but China’s military expansion in the region is definitely concerning. Therefore, to maintain peace and stability in Northeast Asia concerning both China and the Korean Peninsula, Japan needs to work on its relationship with North Korea. Relations with North Korea are important from a geopolitical perspective.

The third motivation in Japan’s North Korea policy is the safety of Japanese lives. Resolving the abduction issue is one of the most important challenges for the current Japanese government, which has stated that abductions are a serious issue related to

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7Yasuhiro Nakasone “Policy Statement at the 102nd Session of the Diet,” http://worldjpn.grips.ac.jp/documents/texts/pm/19850125.SWJ.html.
8Official site of Shinzo Abe: “Constitutional Reform,” https://www.s-abe.or.jp/policy/consutitution_policy.
9As for the so-called Taepodong I of 1998, see 149–151, 180–190 of my Kita Chosen: Henbou wo Tsudugeru Dokusai Kokka (North Korea: Ever Changing Dictatorship), Chukoshinsho, 2013. In fact, with reference to Japanese national security, the ballistic missile Nodong that was test launched on May 29, 1993 and was said to be operationally deployed afterward, should have constituted a more direct threat. However, Taepodong, which flew over the Japanese archipelago, gave a larger shock to Japanese national security. “Kita Chosen Misairu Jikken ni Kogi, Kokkai Ketsugi wo Yato ni Dashin, Jimin Hoshin (Protest against North Korea’s missile test, Calling for the opposition’s co-operation in passing a resolution at the Diet, the LDP’s plan),” Asahi Shimbun, September 1 1998.
10For details on this situation, see Hiraïwa, “Kita Chosen ni okeru Kaku Misairu Kairyu Mondai no Genjo to Tenbo,” 40–47.
11For example, China’s response to the US–South Korea deployment of THAAD is evidence that the question of security certificates in the region is a wider-area issue that goes beyond the Korean Peninsula, i.e., Hajime Takeda, “THAAD Haibi Chugoku no Anzenhosho Shingai sen’’ Kankoku Daitoryo” [The President of ROK: Deployment of THAAD “never threaten China’s security”, Asahi Shimbun, December 12 2017. https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASKDD2BV9KDOUHBI002.html.
Japan’s national sovereignty and the lives and security of its people, and has consistently positioned this as the most important issue for Japan since North Korea recognized the abductions during Prime Minister Koizumi’s first visit to the country in 2002. As will be discussed in detail later, the Japanese people perceived the North Korean response to the abduction issue as insincere, and this has had a profound impact on Japan’s policy toward North Korea through national sympathy for the families of the abductees and the activity of the nonpartisan Abduction Parliamentary League. The formation of an international support system is certainly important, but it is a matter that ultimately needs to be discussed between Japan and North Korea. The Japanese government must establish a normal relationship with North Korea so that it can discuss issues related to the safety of Japanese people.

Apart from the abduction issue, there are other issues concerning the safety of Japanese lives that the Japanese government must negotiate with North Korea. Examples are the cases of Mr. Takeshi Terakoshi, who was shipwrecked in the Sea of Japan in the 1960s and was later confirmed alive in North Korea and that of the detention of the captain and chief engineer of the Daijuhachi Fujisanmaru, a reefer traveling between Japan and North Korea for trade in the 1980s, for “spying.”

Fourth, Japan’s economic opportunities in North Korea must also be considered. If North Korea pushes ahead with opening up, there will be major business opportunities for Japan. Public opinion in Japan toward North Korea became harsher after North Korea’s acknowledgment of the abduction issue during Prime Minister Koizumi’s visit, and repeated sanctions led to a sharp drop in Japan–North Korea economic ties, but economic relations had been maintained until then. Although Japan–North Korea talks have since stagnated, Japan has repeatedly insisted that the restoration of the countries’ relations based on the Japan–North Korea Pyongyang Declaration is also an opportunity for North Korea. Furthermore, underground resources such as rare earth elements are resources of high international interest. China may currently have a monopoly on this trade, but if the conditions are right and Japanese companies are able to participate, this will have great significance for the Japanese economy.

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12See “Abductions of Japanese Citizens by North Korean,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, last modified December 28, 2018, https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/n_korea/abduction/index.html.

13The Headquarters for the Abduction Issue consists of all ministers of state, with the prime minister serving as chief and the minister in charge of the abduction issue, the chief cabinet secretary, and the minister of foreign affairs. To change the abduction issue from a bilateral problem between Japan and North Korea into a problem facing the international community, the Japanese government has positioned the abduction issue as a human rights issue and has communicated this to the wider world. For example, the Headquarters for the Abduction Issue carries out various educational programs for Japanese people, and since 2006, they have designated December 10th to 16th as the Education on North Korean Violation of Human Rights Week to communicate the seriousness of the abduction issue to the international community by holding an international symposium. Furthermore, from 2008 until the end of 2019, the Headquarters have hosted the “national assembly to discuss the abduction issue” for 64 times at the local level to educate Japanese people. See the website of Headquarters for the Abduction Issue, Government of Japan, https://www.rachi.go.jp/en/index.html.

14In 1963, Mr. Takeshi Terakoshi, who was 13 years old at that time, went missing after going fishing with his uncle. In 1987, a letter from his uncle was received, stating that he was alive in North Korea. In Japan, it was suspected that he was abducted by North Korea, but Mr. Terakoshi denied that he was abducted, stating that he had been rescued by a North Korean fishing vessel. Consequently, he was not included in the list of abductees recognized by the Japanese government. For more details, see “Questions on abductee recognition of Mr. Shoji Terakoshi, Mr. Sotoo Terakoshi, and Mr. Takeshi Terakoshi” submitted by Shingo Nishimura, House of Representatives Question No 155 at the 186th Session (submitted on October 26th, 2007).

15In November 1983, the reefer Daijuhachi Fujisanmaru, which was engaged with trade between Japan and North Korea, was handed over to the Japan Coast Guard. For further details, please refer to Nishimura, Kita Chosen Yokuryu.

16Mimura, Gendai Chosen Keizai: Zasetsu to Saisei he no Ayumi, 114.
Therefore, the four motivations for Japan’s policy on North Korea can be summarized as remaining postwar processing, security, economics, and national sovereignty and the safety of Japanese lives.

3. Three factors of Japan’s North Korea policy

Japan has sought to develop ties with North Korea with the four motives discussed in the previous section. These motives will remain unchanged in the future. However, Japan does not aim to normalize relations with North Korea without restrictions, and Japan’s policy on North Korea is bound by the following three factors.

The first factor is the international environment. For instance, it was virtually impossible for Japan to normalize its relations with North Korea during the Cold War. As Japan belonged to the Western bloc during the Cold War, it could not build relations with North Korea, which belonged to the Eastern bloc. The situation was the same for Japan–China relations but changed following the development of closer China–US ties. The approach between the US and China eased tensions between the blocs, creating an atmosphere that encouraged cross-bloc relations. Following this, Japan normalized relations with China in 1972. Needless to say, the overall international environment of Japanese diplomacy in the Cold War era was defined by US policies. Once the Cold War ended, the international environment that Japan faced became even more complex and not only the US but also China, Russia, and international organizations such as the United Nations started to exert influence on Japan’s foreign policy. Still, as North Korea places the US at the center of its foreign policy, the US exerts considerable influence on North Korea. Consequently, Japan–North Korea relations, which started as the global Cold War was coming to an end, are still largely defined by US policies.

Japan’s relationship with Taiwan, which did not have a diplomatic relationship with China, became an issue in the normalization of Japan–China relations. China’s strict maintenance of the Hallstein Doctrine made decisive action regarding Taiwan a condition for the normalization of diplomatic relations with Japan. In contrast, Japan normalized diplomatic relations with China and maintained practical relations with the Taiwanese administration, and Taiwan’s acceptance was important.

As mentioned above, for Japan to seek ties with North Korea, it was essential to ease tensions between the two Cold War camps, as with the normalization of Japan–China relations, and similarly, for South Korea, another divided nation, to accept this. In this regard, unlike China, the two administrations on the Korean Peninsula showed a more flexible application of the Hallstein Doctrine, and many countries have diplomatic relations with both governments. Therefore, it was not necessary to make a choice between South Korea and North Korea. However, Japan–North

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17 North Korea was simultaneously aiming to build relationships with South Korea, Japan, and the US at the end of the Cold War, but as the nuclear issue became intractable, it ended negotiations with Japan and South Korea. Furthermore, it declared its withdrawal from the NPT on March 12, 1993, and concentrated on negotiations with the US only. For more details, see Yoichi Funabashi, *Peninsula Question: The Second Nuclear Crisis in the Korean Peninsula*, Asahi Shimbun-sha, 2006.

18 Kokubun et al., *Nicchu Kankeishi*, 124–126.

19 Kimiya, “Pakuchonhi Seiken no Tai Kyousanken Gaiko: 1970nedai wo Chushin ni,” 5.
Korea relations were restrained by the attitude of South Korea. Thus, South Korea can be seen as the second factor affecting Japan’s North Korea policy.20

These two factors aligned with the ending of the Cold War on the Korean Peninsula. Specifically, when Vice President Kanemaru of the Liberal Democratic Party visited North Korea in 1990 with the secretary-general of the Socialist Party, Tanabe, negotiations on the normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and North Korea commenced. With the end of the US–Soviet Cold War, an end to the Cold War was sought in Northeast Asia; for example, in September 1990, prime minister-level talks between North and South Korea improved relations between the countries. Under such circumstances, Japan’s seeking of relations with North Korea contributed to peace and stability in Northeast Asia and was based on the second motivation for Japan’s North Korea policy. The third motive, the issue of the safety of Japanese lives, was also important for the Japanese government at this time. The purpose of the Kanemaru-Tanabe Visiting Group was to secure the release of two detained crew members of the 18th Fujisan Maru and launch intergovernmental negotiations to improve Japan–North Korea relations. Taking a more positive stance, North Korea suggested that the joint statement includes “negotiations between the governments to normalize diplomatic relations starting from November,” with which Japan complied.

South Korea’s response to this was severe. Japan explained in advance that the purpose of Kanemaru’s visit was to “open the window for the release of two crew members of the 18th Fujisan Maru and dialogue between governments.” Vice President Kanemaru visited the Democratic Liberal Party in Seoul to explain the Japan–North Korea talks, but President Roh Tae-woo cautioned Japan against developing a relationship with North Korea outside of the control of South Korea, saying that “sufficient prior consultation” between the governments of Japan and South Korea was necessary, and that the development of Japan–North Korea ties must contribute to a “meaningful progress of dialogue and exchange between North and South Korea,” indicating that South Korea’s acceptance was necessary for Japan’s policy on North Korea.21 In 1988, President Roh Tae-woo published the “Special Declaration in the Interest of National Self-Respect, Unification and Prosperity” consisting of six points and stated that the South Korean government would help on improving the relationship between North Korea, Japan, and the US.22 It is important to note that President Roh did not state that Japan and the US had a free hand in building relationships with North Korea; instead, South Korea’s “co-operation,” which is its “involvement,” was taken for granted. Regardless of changes in government, this has remained the South Korean government’s basic stance.

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20 South Korea’s attitudes to North Korea differ significantly whether the conservatives or liberals are in power. The conservative government puts emphasis on security co-operation with Japan and the US, believing that deterrents against North Korea are necessary. On the other hand, the liberal government places emphasis on the relationship with North Korea based on ethnic similarities. Consequently, South Korea’s wishes for Japan’s actions regarding North Korea differ significantly based on whether South Korea’s governing party is conservative or liberal. “Kankoku niokeru Seikenkotai to Taigaikankei: Kita Chosen Seisaku wo Jiku tosuru Taigaikankei no Henka (Change in government and foreign policy of South Korea: Changes in foreign policy focusing on policies towards North Korea),” December 2010, Journal of International Security, Vol. 38 No. 3, Japan Association for International Security, pp. 8–26.

21For further details, see Suzuki, “Kita Chosen no Tainichi Seisaku,” 50–75.

22 Article 4 of the Declaration states, “we do not oppose our friendly countries are engaged with trade as far as non-military goods are concerned,” though Article 6 states “we are prepared to co-operate when North Korea improves relationship with our friendly countries such as Japan and the US.” http://worldjpn.grips.ac.jp/documents/texts/JPKR/19880707.O1J.html.
The first meeting for negotiations regarding the normalization of relations between Japan and North Korea was held in Pyongyang, the second was held in Japan, and the third was held in Beijing. The agenda for the negotiations included issues such as security, past settlements, and missing Japanese people, but after the progress that had been expected was not seen, North Korea unilaterally declared the termination of the talks at the 8th round in 1992. On March 12 of the following year, North Korea declared its withdrawal from the NPT and triggered its first nuclear crisis, drastically changing the first factor and making it very difficult to build a Japan–North Korea relationship.

Incidentally, as Japan–North Korea talks were initiated, Japan’s domestic politics appeared to be the third factor that determined Japan’s policy on North Korea. In other words, the Socialist Party played a major role in Kanemaru’s visit from its preparatory stages. In early May 1990, the Socialist Party’s Hajime Fukada, the director of the national movement, visited North Korea and confirmed their intention to accept the Kanemaru-led Liberal Democratic Party delegation, and in mid-July, a visit by Wataru Kubo, the vice-chairman of the Socialist Party’s committee, resulted in the agreement of a system to “negotiate between the Liberal Democratic Party, the Socialist Party, and the Korean Labor Party, and to transfer it to the government stage later.” In early September, alongside the talks between the prime ministers of North and South Korea, the Liberal Democratic Party and the Socialist Party’s advance team visited Pyongyang to finalize the visit by the Kanemaru-Tanabe delegation.

Japan’s domestic politics continued to seek ties with North Korea later as well. The Socialist Party formed a coalition with the Liberal Democratic Party in 1994, forming the Murayama government, and after suffering food shortages due to severe flood damage in 1995, North Korea appealed to the Murayama administration for food assistance. A three-party delegation of the Liberal Democratic Party, the Socialist Party, and the New Party Sakigake, headed by Michio Watanabe, visited the country. The delegation sought to resume the negotiations on normalizing diplomatic relations that had been suspended in 1992. Japan continued to seek ties with North Korea afterward. Former Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama led a multiparty visit in December 1999, and the ninth round of talks on normalizing diplomatic relations was held in April 2000. The talks continued until the eleventh round, but ultimately, Japan and North Korea could not reach an agreement and the talks were suspended.

As described above, the structure of Japan’s attitude toward North Korea is determined by three factors: the atmosphere of the international community, the attitude of South Korea, and the domestic political situation in Japan. Although this structure has basically remained unchanged, Prime Minister Koizumi’s visit to North Korea greatly affected

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23 For the role of the Socialist Party in the commencement of the negotiations on the normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and Korea, see Shin, Ilbon ui Daebukjeongchaeg 1945-1992nyeon, 201–264.
24 Kim, “Niccho Kosho ni okeru Nihon Gaikou no Henka,” 6–8. Since the resignation of the Murayama government in 1996, the Socialist Party’s influence on Japan–North Korea relations has decreased. In particular, as North Korea established a relationship with the Liberal Democratic Party, the governing party, the importance of the Socialist Party to North Korea also decreased. The Socialist Party later divided, and when the abduction issue came to light, Takako Doi, the leader of the Social Democratic Party, one of the successors of the Socialist Party, offered an explanation that as North Korea insisted “there was no abduction,” it was unable to pursue the matter sufficiently and apologized. Still, the Socialist Party’s attitudes to North Korea came under fierce criticism. "Rachimondai Shamin ‘Yutokankei’ Ashikase, Kita Chosen no Shucho Unomi (The Abduction Issue: the Social Democratic Party shackled by the ‘friendly party relationship’: blind acceptance of North Korea’s statements),” Yomiuri Shimbun, October 8 2002.
Japan–North Korea relations, increasing Japanese citizens’ interest in the abduction issue, leading to a large influence from public opinion in addition to simple internal politics.

4. Koizumi visit and six-party talks: sharing goals with the international community

In September 2002, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visited North Korea, a first for a Japanese prime minister, to hold talks with President Kim Jong Il and sign the Pyongyang Declaration. Prime Minister Koizumi repeatedly argued that the purpose of his visit should be to determine whether negotiations for normalization could be resumed, stating that the conditions for resuming talks were to normalize diplomatic relations between North Korea and Japan, and to determine whether North Korea was willing to do its part to resolve the existing problems, namely North Korea’s issues with the international community (specifically security issues like the nuclear and missile programs), and the bilateral issues between Japan and North Korea (specifically the abduction and unidentified ship issues). At the summit, the two leaders confirmed that they would cooperate to maintain and strengthen peace and stability in the Northeast Asian region, and the Chairman of the National Defense Commission Kim Jong Il expressed his intention to suspend missile tests after 2003. Additionally, Defense Commission Chairman Kim Jong Il acknowledged the issue of the abduction of Japanese people, acknowledging that North Korea was involved in the incident, apologizing, and promising to punish those involved and prevent it from happening again.

At the meeting, Japanese colonial rule of the Korean Peninsula was also discussed, and the Pyongyang Declaration between Japan and North Korea was adopted. The Declaration stated that Japan and North Korea would normalize diplomatic ties after resolving the pending issues such as abductions, nuclear weapons, and missiles, and after normalization, Japan would provide large-scale economic support to North Korea.

However, North Korea revealed that five of the abductees had survived and eight had died, which was shocking for Japan. Thus, the abduction issue became very significant to Japan–North Korea relations. Moreover, the victims’ cause of death was highly unclear and was not accepted by their families, which incensed the Japanese public, who viewed North Korea as acting dishonestly. Despite this, Prime Minister Koizumi resumed negotiations to normalize diplomatic relations in accordance with the Japan–North Korea Pyongyang Declaration, calling for North Korea to return all the abductees.

However, in October, following Prime Minister Koizumi’s visit to North Korea, US Assistant Secretary of State John F. Kelly visited North Korea for talks regarding concerns about its nuclear development and uranium-enrichment program, and the second nuclear crisis began when North Korea’s undersecretary for foreign affairs, Kang Sok-ju, acknowledged the uranium-enrichment program and said that it had “come to the point of Korea having nuclear weapons or more.” The issues of the nuclear program and missiles were very important to Japan, but this international incident greatly affected the timing of the resumption of negotiations between Japan and North Korea. However,

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25. "Japan-DPRK Pyongyang Declaration," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, September 17 2002, See https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/n_korea/pmv0209/pyongyang.html.
26. Wada, “Rachi Mondai to Niccho Kokkou Seijoka,” 193–197.
27. Funabashi, Za Penishura Kuesuchon, 145–211.
the families of the abductees requested that the Japanese government not return the five to North Korea, and the Japanese government accepted this request. North Korea, in turn, accused the Japanese government of breaching the agreement, and these differences between Japan and North Korea regarding the abduction issue were not addressed at the 12th Normalization Talk that took place soon afterward. Since then, the families of the abductees and the nonpartisan Abduction Parliamentary League demanded that the Japanese government assume uncompromising attitudes toward North Korea, and it became difficult for the Japanese government to reach a compromise. Thus, in terms of the Japanese domestic situation, the third factor – the prevailing mood – halted negotiations with North Korea.

Concerning the Japan–North Korea Pyongyang Declaration, two issues need to be resolved in order for Japan to normalize relations with North Korea: the abduction issue, the symbol of bilateral ties, and North Korea’s issues with the international community, such as its nuclear and missile programs. However, the resolution of the abduction issue and that of the nuclear and missile issue were not necessarily synchronized. On the one hand, the problem was that if there was no progress on the abduction issue while talks moved forward regarding the nuclear and missile issue, the abduction issue would be left behind. On the other hand, if progress on the issue of the nuclear and missile programs stagnates, even if there is progress on the abduction issue, restrictions will be imposed by the international community. The linkage or separation of the abduction and nuclear/missile issues is thus an important consideration for Japan.

Finally, Japan aims to find a comprehensive solution without separating the abduction issue from the nuclear and missiles issue, taking the stance that both “dialogue” and “pressure” are necessary to solve the various issues. To this end, there is a need to strengthen cooperation in the international community and call for a change in the stance on North Korea, while employing both “dialogue” and “pressure” in a balanced manner; this has become the current model for Japan’s policy on North Korea.

Since the abduction issue is still based on bilateral discussions between Japan and North Korea, cooperation with the international community has been a difficult task for Japan. This was particularly the case in the six-party talks on the North Korean nuclear issue that began in August 2003.

The international community was focused on the nuclear issue, but Japan, seeking a comprehensive solution to the issues of abductions, the nuclear program, and missiles, had to avoid neglecting the abduction issue in favor of resolving the nuclear and missiles issue. As Japanese domestic opinion was that as long as there was no progress on the abduction issue, Japan should assume uncompromising attitudes to North Korea, progress in the abduction issue was essential for the Japanese government to play its assigned role in the six-party talks. Naturally, the nuclear issue occupied the center stage at the first meeting in August 2003 and the second in February 2004. Although the Japanese delegation argued that the resolution of the abduction issue was important, it was nearly exclusively addressed in bilateral talks between Japan and North Korea. With help from

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28 https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/n_korea/abd/nego12_gh.html.
29 "Section 3: Issues surrounding North Korea; 1. Japan’s basic policy concerning North Korea,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, Diplomatic Bluebook 2004.
30 Hiraïwa, “Kita Chosen Kakumondai to Rokusha Kyougi,” 25–42.
31 https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/n_korea/6kaigo/6kaigo2_gh.html.
unofficial negotiations, Prime Minister Koizumu visited North Korea twice in May 2004 accompanied by five family members of the abductees who had already returned to Japan. Japan was to argue that the resolution of the abduction issue was essential at the six-party talks to secure other countries’ understanding and make use of individual channels.

Under these circumstances, Japan succeeded in setting the abduction issue as a common goal at the fourth six-party talks. In addition to the denuclearization of North Korea and normalizing North Korea–US relations, the joint statement included the declaration that the “DPRK and Japan have promised to take steps to normalize diplomatic relations on the foundation of clearing up the unfortunate past and resolving their issues based on the Pyongyang Declaration.” As a result, Japan succeeded in linking all issues and created a situation in which the abduction issue was less likely to be left behind. However, once the issues were linked, the progress of the nuclear and missile issues raised a corresponding burden for Japan regarding economic cooperation with North Korea. When Japan took the position that progress on the abduction issue was essential for economic cooperation, the concerned countries began to apply pressure on the Japanese side to resolve the issue. This tendency was especially prominent when progress on the nuclear missile issue was expected; when those issues stagnated, it was, of course, difficult for Japan to engage in economic cooperation with North Korea alone, and it was easier to work on the abduction issue.

5. Japan–North Korea relations: the Stockholm Agreement and the Abe administration

Unfortunately, North Korea conducted its first nuclear test in October 2006 during the six-party talks. Further six-party talks were conducted in December 2008, but were ultimately suspended. When the Obama administration came into power in the United States, it initially sought to open a dialogue with North Korea and even achieved the Leap Day Agreement. However, North Korea conducted a de-facto ICBM launch test that it called a satellite launch test and the US changed its stance to “strategic patience,” in which it would not respond until North Korea changed its stance. As a result, Japan did not restrict major Japanese policies except for adopting excessively conciliatory policies toward North Korea, as did South Korea. Therefore, Japan’s North Korea policy is determined by the atmosphere of international relations, which is the first factor, and the attitude of South Korea, which is the second factor. An example of this is the Stockholm Agreement, detailed below.

32“Kita Chosen Rachihigaisha no Kazoku Gonin Kikoku (Five family members of the North Korean abductees returned to Japan),” Asahi Shimbun. May 23 2004.
33Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, September 19 2005, https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/n_korea/6party/joint0509.html.
34At the fifth session of the six-party talks, North Korea submitted a full declaration of all nuclear programs and disabled all existing nuclear facilities, increasing its scale to six tons of heavy oil, and on the agreement to provide economic, energy, and humanitarian assistance, the two-step government stated that “Japan will not participate until the progress of Japan-Korea relations, including the abduction issue, has been resolved.” See Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Dai 5 kai Roukusha Kaigo Dai 3 sesshon no Gaiyou” [The Overview of the Third session of the Fifth Round of the Six-party Talks], February 2 2007, https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/n_korea/6party/action0702.html.
35Matt Spetalnick, and Anna Yukhananov, “North Korea tests Obama’s ‘strategic patience’.”.
There is no doubt that the abduction issue is important to Japan, but as it was difficult to make North Korea to join the negotiation if the abduction issue was the only agenda item, the Japanese government tried to induce a response from North Korea by linking the abduction issue and humanitarian issues. Thus, approach to North Korea was established during the administration of the Democratic Party of Japan. The behind-the-scenes negotiations regarding the return of the remains of Japanese citizens who died in North Korea before World War II and the issue of bereaved families visiting graves were halted by Kim Jong Il’s sudden death. Talks recommenced when the Kim Jong-Un regime took power in April 2012; in August of the same year, the Japan–North Korea Red Cross Talks were held, and intergovernmental talks were held later in December of the same year. However, these talks were suspended after North Korea launched a long-range ballistic missile, which they called a satellite launch.

At this time, there was a change in the Japanese government and the Abe administration came into power. The Abe administration continued negotiations with North Korea behind the scenes, and in March 2013, the Japan–North Korea Red Cross meeting was held for the first time after a year and 7 months, which led to intergovernmental talks. In May 2014, North Korea, which had previously declared that the abduction issue had been solved, agreed to reexamine the issue. The Abe administration has shown willingness to normalize diplomatic relations depending on North Korea’s response, and North Korea has changed its attitude. This is what is called the “Stockholm Agreement.”

Under the Stockholm Agreement, North Korea would establish a special investigative committee to conduct a re-investigation of four issues: (1) the remains of Japanese citizens, (2) Japanese people and their spouses who remained in North Korea, (3) abductees, and (4) missing persons (including specific missing persons requested by the Japanese side). Further, North Korea would discuss the return of survivors. In addition to the abduction issue, the issues of the remains of the dead and Japanese individuals and their spouses staying in North Korea would have been easy for North Korea to accept as humanitarian issues—which was important to Japan as its third motivation.

North Korea thus established a special committee to start the investigation, and Japan simultaneously lifted some of its sanctions. However, talks did not always go smoothly because North Korea tried to prioritize the issues of the Japanese remains and the remaining Japanese people and their spouses, while it was essential for Japan to make progress on the abduction victims. The talks stalled in this way; North Korea conducted a nuclear test and a ballistic missile launch test in January 2016, and in February 2016, Japan established new independent sanctions. More concretely, the Japanese government placed a restriction on the movement of people between Japan and North Korea, restrictions on remittance and other payment to North Korea, a total ban on the North Korean registered ships from entering Japanese ports, and expanded the scope of asset freezes. North Korea rejected this and unilaterally announced that the re-investigation had been completely suspended and that the investigative committee had been disbanded.

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36 Hiraiwa, “Kita Chosen ha Ima Nani wo Kangaeteiru ka?” 220–222.
37 The Bilateral Talk between Japan and North Korea (Overview), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, May 30 2014, https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/a_o/na/kp/page4_000494.html.
38 https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kp/page4e_000377.html.
39 “Kita Chosen ‘Rachichosa wo Chushi’ Seisai ni Hanpatsu, Tokubetsui Kaitai wo Sengen (North Korea acting against the suspension of the abduction research” sanction, declaring the resolution of the special committee),” Asahi Shimbun, February 13 2016.
North Korea’s nuclear test drastically changed the international atmosphere, the first factor, and Japan also resumed its own sanctions on North Korea, leaving the Stockholm Agreement in the air. In addition, there was dissatisfaction with the slow proceeding of the re-investigation in the domestic situation – the third factor – and a critical atmosphere for negotiations with North Korea. With the nuclear tests conducted under these circumstances, there was a shift from “dialogue” to “pressure.”

6. The emergence of the Trump administration and Japan’s policy on North Korea

In the last year of the Obama administration, North Korea sought to improve its nuclear and missile capabilities as much as possible before the formation of the new US administration. Nuclear tests were conducted twice in January and September 2016, the year of the US presidential election, and indeed there were 13 launches in succession, including long-range ballistic missiles called satellite launches, submarine-type ballistic missiles, and short- and medium-range ballistic missiles. However, once Donald Trump was elected president, North Korea stopped nuclear and missile testing while determining the Trump administration’s relevant policies.

When it became clear that the Trump administration would take a tough stance on North Korea, the country resumed its nuclear and missile tests in September 2017. Sixteen missile tests of various kinds were conducted since February, and on November 29, the experimental launch of the ICBM Hwasong-15 (Mars-15) was conducted; with it, North Korea claimed it had succeeded in putting the entire US in range and obtained nuclear strike capabilities against the US in conjunction with the nuclear test it conducted in September. There are still many issues, such as the miniaturization of nuclear weapons and reentry technology for ballistic missiles, but with this, North Korea steered toward the dialogue route from the following year.

During this period, the first factor, the international environment; the second factor, the attitude of South Korea; and the third factor, the situation in Japan, were all involved in facing down North Korea. Therefore, Japan’s attitude toward North Korea has been to exert “maximum pressure.” In particular, at the 2017 United Nations General Assembly, Prime Minister Abe said, “Every attempt to solve a problem through dialogue has been ignored. What hope of success do we have if we make the same mistake thrice? [. . .] Pressure, not dialogue, is what is necessary.”

However, Prime Minister Abe’s view changed drastically after North Korea took the dialogue route in 2018 and President Trump responded. First, Japan’s attitude changed after President Trump announced in March that he would accept a summit meeting with

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40Tosaki, “Changes in the North Korean Nuclear Problem and Japan’s Deterrence System,” http://www2.jiia.or.jp/pdf/research/H28_Korean_Peninsula/13-tosaki.pdf.
41Radiopress, Kita Chosen Seisaku Doko, 5–12.
42Hiraiwa, “Kita Chosen no ‘Shisei Henka’ wa dokomade Honmono ka?”, 96–103.
43As Japan does not have the ability to pursue physical coercive force against North Korea, the “pressure” it can apply to North Korea mainly consists of economic sanctions. Also, as physical coercive force is tested within the framework of collaboration with the US, it is dependent on the US policy toward North Korea. Despite these restrictions, Japan is actively working to verify whether the sanctions based on the UN resolutions have precisely been carried out. For more detail, see Furukawa, Kita Chosen: Kaku no Shikingen.
44“Address by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Seventy-Second Session of the United Nations General Assembly,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, September 20 2017, https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/unp_a/page4e_000674.html.
Chairman Kim Jong-Un. According to President Trump, Prime Minister Abe changed his stance that “dialogue for the sake of dialogue is meaningless,” tweeting that he was “very enthusiastic about his talks with North Korea.” In addition, just before the US–North Korea summit meeting, Prime Minister Abe said at a press conference at the G7 Charlevoix Summit that he was “ready to provide economic cooperation” if the abduction issue was resolved.

Furthermore, in a UN speech in 2018, Prime Minister Abe said that “North Korea is at a crossroads whether it can seize historical opportunities” and “To solve the abduction issue, I am also ready to break the mutual distrust with North Korea and face Chairman Kim Jong-Un directly and start anew.” This was a major change from his statement that “Pressure, not dialogue, is what is necessary” at the UN General Assembly Meeting the previous year.

The change in President Trump’s attitude means that the first factor for Japan will change drastically. Under these conditions, it can be expected that Japan will change its attitude and respond in a way that maximizes its effectiveness in the international environment. In addition, since the atmosphere of the dialogue after 2018, symbolized by the US–North Korea summit meeting, was conducted based on South Korea’s initiative, the second factor, South Korea’s stance, will welcome progress in Japan–North Korea relations. As for the third factor, the atmosphere inside Japan, in the context of the US–North Korea summit meeting, the North-South summit meeting, and the Sino–North Korea summit meeting, concerns have been raised over Japan not meeting with Kim Jong-Un; the families of the abductees are also seeking to open communication with North Korea, thus, all factors point to starting a “dialogue” with North Korea.

As described above, the Abe Government has changed Japan’s course regarding its North Korea policy. The major reason for this change is that Japan, which has renounced the use of military force, cannot maintain the “pressure” policy on its own. The “pressure” Japan can exert is limited to economic sanctions, but as it has been introducing its own sanctions on North Korea stage by stage since 2006, North Korea’s economic dependency on Japan has decreased to the point that there is no longer any effective “pressure” that Japan can exert on its own. While Japan has maintained an uncompro-mising attitude in examining the implementation of UN-backed economic sanctions, in the environment in which not only China and Russia but also the US and South Korea have been advocating solutions through a “dialogue,” there is no other option but a “dialogue” for Japan.

The relationship between President Trump and President Kim Jong-Un has been maintained, but US–North Korea talks have not progressed, even after the second US–North Korea meeting in February 2019 effectively broke down. In March 2019, the United Nations Human Rights Council, which has been active for 11 years, postponed

45”G7 Sharurubowa Samitto Shusseki ni tsuite no Naigai Kishakaiken” [Press Conference on G7 Charlevoix Summit Attendance], Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, June 9 2018.
46“Address by Prime Minister Abe at the Seventy-Third Session of the United Nations General Assembly,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, September 25 2018,https://japan.kantei.go.jp/98_abe/statement/201809/_00005.html.
47The families of the abductees have always wanted to change North Korea’s attitudes by means of “pressure.” However, as North Korea has suspended the re-investigation based on the Stockholm Agreement, and because the dissolution of the investigation committee has led to the suspension of Japan–North Korea negotiation as well as the aging of family members of the abductees, they now seek a dialogue with North Korea as “the rescue mission in the new phase” seeking an early resolution since September 2016. http://www.sukuukai.jp/mailnews/item_5775.html.
48https://www.meti.go.jp/policy/external_economy/trade_control/01_seido/04_seisai/KitaChosen.html.
the submission of a resolution condemning North Korea⁴⁹, and in the 2019 edition of the Diplomatic Blue Book, the wording used was “to maximize pressure.”⁵⁰ In addition, Prime Minister Abe stated in an interview with the Sankei Shimbun on May 5 2019 that “I have no choice but to face Kim himself in order to break the mutual distrust between the two countries. Therefore, I would like to meet with Kim without any conditions and talk frankly and openly, with an open mind.”⁵¹

In addition, at the UN General Assembly in 2019, Prime Minister Abe said that “Japan supports President Trump’s approach. The leaders attempting frank talks and looking to the light in the future to solve the tasks at hand have changed the dynamics of North Korea. I am determined to face Chairman Kim Jong-Un myself directly without any conditions.”⁵²

7. Conclusion

The four motives remain the same for Japan. However, three factors determine Japan’s attitude toward North Korea. The first factor in boosting the progress of Japan–North Korea relations is that the US–North Korea summits will be held as determined by President Trump. In addition, since the Moon Jae-in administration directed the US–North Korea summit meeting, it may be said that the second factor, which is related to South Korea, also supports progress in Japan–North Korea relations. The third Japanese domestic factor is that in light of the three North Korea–United States summits, five North-South summit meetings, five China–North Korea summit meetings, President Putin and Chairman Kim Jong-Un’s talks, and changes in the international environment after President Trump decided to hold a summit with Chairman Kim Jong Un, there is a strong opinion in Japan that relations with North Korea should be promoted. In particular, the Association of Families is seeking a dialogue with North Korea, and all three factors are pushing for Japan to talk with North Korea.

Japan’s North Korean policy is structured based on four motivations and three factors, but the approach to North Korea depends on the importance of the current Japanese administration places on the four motives. If the administration at the time aims to build relations with North Korea, it will not only act on North Korea, but also on the international environment – the first factor – and South Korea, the second factor, will need to create an atmosphere that supports Japan while at the same time persuading the Japanese public to accept the normalization of Japan–North Korea relations. For Japan to build a relationship with North Korea independently, it is essential to actively work on the three factors.

Prime Minister Abe has called for an unconditional dialogue, but Japan has not changed its basic stance of a “comprehensive resolution to the abductions, nuclear

⁴⁹“Kita Chosen Hinan Ketsugi, Teiansezu; Seifu, Rachikosho Misue Tankan (Not proposing the condemnation of North Korea, the government has changed its course with a view to the abduction negotiation),” Asahi Shimbun, March 13 2019.

⁵⁰“Kita Chosen he Atsuryoku, Hyogen Sakuso; Rachidakai Neraika, Gaikoseisho (The expression, ‘pressure on North Korea’ deleted; seeking a breakthrough in abduction? Diplomatic Blue Paper),” Asahi Shimbun, April 19 2019.

⁵¹“Abeshusho "Mujoken de Nicchokaigi": HaIKEI ni KYOKO na Nichibeikankei (”Unconditional Japan–North Korea Talk’ Prime Minister Abe: Strong Japan-US relations in the background),” Sankei Shimbun, May 2 2019.

⁵²“Address by Prime Minister Abe at the Seventy-Fourth Session of the United Nations General Assembly,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, September 24 2019,
weapons, and missiles.” So, what will Prime Minister Abe discuss with Chairman Kim Jong-Un? Perhaps President Trump’s repetition of North Korea’s “bright future” with a concrete image of the country’s stance on abductions, nuclear weapons, and missiles will prompt a change. If North Korea resolves the issues based on the Japan–North Korea Pyongyang Declaration, it will receive economic cooperation after the normalization of diplomatic relations. Prime Minister Abe said in an interview with the Sankei Shimbun that “I expect Kim to be a leader who can flexibly and strategically determine what is best for the nation,” suggesting that Japan–North Korea relations would improve if North Korea itself cleared the conditions for this, forcing North Korea to make the decision to have a “bright future.”

In response to Japan’s condemnation of North Korea’s short-range ballistic missile launch as a “violation of the United Nations Resolution,” Song Il-ho, the ambassador for the normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and North Korea, stated that Japan–North Korea relations have continued to be strained, with the two countries “facing greater disaster and ruin,” and the UN Human Rights Commission has pointed out that it could once again propose a resolution on human rights.

In any case, Japan’s role will continue to grow if US–North Korea relations progress. Considering the movements in this regard toward the end of the year (as North Korea has set a deadline), various efforts must be made to ensure that the Trump administration delivers the complete, verifiable, and irreversible nuclear abandonment that the international community demands. Japan will play a major role in this.

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