

Washington Japanwatch / Japan stuck on abduction issue

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Generally, hard-liners favor a strong foreign policy, but in the six-party talks over the North Korea crisis it is clear that Japanese hard-liners have sabotaged their nation's negotiating position.

Rather than entering the talks from a strong bargaining position, Japan has been relegated to the role of fifth-party whiner--protesting North Korea's abduction of Japanese nationals, but offering no public proposal to make a deal with Pyongyang that would bring closure to the issue.

As the critical next round of talks is set to resume, Tokyo should come prepared to bargain hard, or at least bargain with North Korea to achieve its objectives.

It is no secret that the abduction issue tops Japan's agenda at the six-party talks. A more rational assessment of the nation's priorities would focus on resolving the security threat that North Korea poses with its illicit nuclear program and long-range missiles.

Yet amid the uproar over the fate of Japanese abductees, including the tragic story of Megumi Yokota, the Japanese public is in no mood to concentrate on the arcane details of North Korea's nuclear program. Nor are Japanese inclined to strike a deal with Pyongyang that provides economic largesse for a few scraps of dubious information about the fate of the abductees.

From the outside, it is easy to criticize Japan's preoccupation with the abduction issue over more serious security concerns. But in Japan, the abductions are seen as a national tragedy that resonates too deeply to be set aside in talks with North Korea. As a result, Japanese negotiators kept raising the abduction issue during the course of the six-party talks earlier this month. North Korean officials predictably lashed back, but even Chinese and South Korean diplomats seemed to complain that Japan was "holding up" discussions on the nuclear crisis.

Japan's preoccupation with the abduction issue would not be so misplaced if it could approach the problem from a much stronger position. Instead of using every chance it has to vent its anger at North Korea, Tokyo should find ways of making the most out of the six-party process in order to bring some closure to the abduction cases.

Not only would this approach stand a better chance of attaining Japan's main objectives, but it also could reinforce proposals by the other nations at the negotiating table.

South Korea's proposal of providing 2 million kilowatts of electricity to the North in exchange for its denuclearization seems uniquely suited for a greater Japanese role. Tokyo could agree to join this scheme under the strict condition that Pyongyang meets a clear set of expectations on resolving the abduction issue once and for all.

As the South Korean proposal now stands, there are doubts about whether Seoul can deliver this deal on its own. The Nautilus Institute argued in a July 21 report that Japan was the only nation with the resources to rehabilitate North Korea's power system so that it could absorb a large infusion of electricity from the South. There also are questions about whether South Korea could finance the project, which may cost 2.4 billion dollars to start and as much as 1.5 billion dollars per year to continue.

Certainly, a joint energy scheme would require complex coordination between Tokyo and Seoul, but this has been accomplished before under the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization. Additional complications could arise between Tokyo and Washington, which might not appreciate Japan's more flexible approach. However, it is hard to imagine the United States objecting to an aid package that would only be delivered if North Korea dismantled its nuclear programs.

The real problem, however, is that Japanese officials cannot even consider a deal with North Korea given the current political environment in Tokyo. Hard-liners in Japan, including such groups as the National Association for the Rescue of Japanese Kidnapped by North Korea, have created a powerful political force that has effectively killed off any initiative to engage Pyongyang. As Diet elections are set for Sept. 11, there is even less political will in Tokyo to challenge hard-line policies.

Far from empowering Japan's position at the six-party talks, hard-liners have only marginalized Japan in the discussions and made resolving the abduction issue all the more distant. Without much to contribute beyond protests, Japanese negotiators now are almost entirely reliant on the other powers to reach an agreement on denuclearizing North Korea, let alone reaching some settlement on the abduction issue.

Japan needs to reclaim a central role in the six-party process, as it is the mechanism that will determine whether there is a breakthrough or an escalation of the nuclear crisis. With so much at stake, Japanese leaders should overcome prevailing emotions and reorient their policy toward North Korea (the formation of a new cabinet after the upcoming Diet elections may provide an opportunity to do so).

Whether it is at the next six-party meeting or soon thereafter, Tokyo should make it clear that there will be no aid to North Korea without settlement of the abduction issue, and without Japanese aid no large-scale economic deal will be sustainable.

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