

How Japan Might Lose Out in the Korea Talks



President Trump and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan at the White House on June 7. Japan could be left vulnerable depending on the substance of Mr. Trump's meeting with North Korea about denuclearization. Credit Andrew Harnik/Associated Press

TOKYO — Even if Tuesday's meeting between President Trump and Kim Jong-un, North Korea's leader, goes well, Japan stands to lose from it in some ways. Despite a last-ditch effort last week by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan to play adviser to Mr. Trump before the talks, the American president still seems rather unconcerned by Japan's long-term strategic interests — actually, its imperatives.

As Mr. Abe put it last week, "first and foremost, we need to seek advancement for the abduction, nuclear and missile programs." He meant that Japan's priorities are to obtain the return of all Japanese citizens that North Korea abducted years ago, North Korea's actual denuclearization and an end to its efforts to develop any missiles, and not just the kind that can reach the United States.

Although the abductee issue is an emotional and sensitive matter in Japan, the government finds itself dependent on third parties to discuss it on its behalf, much like President Moon Jae-in of South Korea reportedly did with Mr. Kim in late April. On this question, and other major matters to do with North Korea, Japan has no choice for now but to try to influence negotiations from the sidelines, or else it risks being left behind altogether.

In the event that Mr. Trump does take up the abduction issue with Mr. Kim for Japan, as he has pledged to do, the North Korean government probably would use the hostages as leverage and release them only for specific gains, as in 2002 when it allowed five Japanese captives to return home in exchange for the promise of economic assistance.

Then there is denuclearization, which means different things to different parties. For Japan, the complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear program is essential, as James Mattis, the United States secretary of defense, has said. Verification, the most important prong of this approach, may also be the most difficult to satisfy: It would require North Korea to truthfully reveal the location of all its nuclear sites and fissile material — a very unlikely prospect.

Mr. Kim should be expected to exploit any ambiguity in order to hedge or dither while trying to secure relief from international sanctions. He is playing a long game and has time on his side. Election cycles in the United States, South Korea and Japan are short, but Mr. Kim is unelected and is only in his 30s.

Even if he vows to make what seem like significant commitments toward denuclearization, he will already have accomplished one of his main goals: Just by dint of these talks being held he will have succeeded in getting the United States to, in effect, treat North Korea as a de facto nuclear weapons state.

Denuclearizing North Korea can only be a phased process, for technical reasons, and it could take up to 15 years according to the nuclear expert Siegfried Hecker. Mr. Kim might slow it down further by first proposing, as he has begun to do, a peace treaty formally ending the Korean War to replace the 1953 armistice currently in effect. This, however, would be a dirty peace, especially for Japan, which in the meantime would remain as exposed as ever to a North Korean attack.

Japan will be all the more vulnerable if, as the government fears, the United States seeks to obtain North Korea's agreement to freeze its intercontinental ballistic missiles program without obtaining guarantees that North Korea will also curtail its development of short- and mid-range missiles. Such an arrangement might protect the United States, but it would leave Japan (as well as South Korea) in the immediate danger zone, as well as open to nuclear coercion by North Korea.

Of even greater concern for Japan (and, again, South Korea) is that the United States, as a concession to North Korea, might offer to revise some aspects of its alliance with South Korea. For example, it could scale back joint military exercises or agree to withdraw U.S. troops from the country. But either proposal, even kept vague, would undercut America's longstanding commitment to the security of South Korea, with far-reaching implications for Japan.

Any such curtailment would draw Japan deeper still into North Korea's threat zone, while also undermining the credibility of the protection it is supposed to derive from America's nuclear umbrella and generally weakening its alliance with the United States. That, in turn, would give Japan reason to expand its missile-defense system and, perhaps, its strike capabilities against North Korea — and maybe even a reason to hold public discussions about what has long been a taboo here: obtaining nuclear weapons of its own. In this respect, progress toward denuclearizing North Korea could backfire.

Another major security consideration for Japan is China and its efforts to dominate the region. China's strategy is to slow down North Korea's denuclearization, weaken the United States's alliance with South Korea, marginalize Japan and frustrate cooperation among the United States, South Korea and Japan — all goals that would actually be advanced if Mr. Trump takes an ambiguous stance on denuclearization.

Mr. Abe has welcomed the talks between Mr. Trump and Mr. Kim as a chance to make progress on the issues that matter to Japan. But he now keenly realizes that his efforts at golf diplomacy — nearly 30 telephone calls and official meetings with Mr. Trump, including two at Mar-a-Lago — could not convince the American president that alliances are not transactional but based on trust. Mr. Trump has displayed too little consideration for Japan's interests, especially given the importance of this relationship. As a result, Japan is both dangerously exposed to

the threat posed by North Korea and largely disenfranchised in the current negotiations, and it could suffer even from progress made in the talks.

Yoichi Funabashi is chairman of the Asia Pacific Initiative, an independent think tank in Tokyo, and the author of “The Peninsula Question: A Chronicle of the Second Korean Nuclear Crisis.”

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook and Twitter (@NYTopinion), and sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter.

Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/11/opinion/japan-north-korea-denuclearization-trump.html>

[Disclaimer]