



Japan-North Korea rapprochement: Will it lead to normalisation of ties?

*Dr. Shamshad A. Khan**

Unexpected warmth is being witnessed in Japan's engagement with North Korea, the reclusive East Asian nation with which Tokyo does not have formal diplomatic relations. The abduction of Japanese citizens by North Korea in the 1970s and 1980s, apparently to provide language training to its intelligence agencies, had been one of the contentious issues between the Tokyo and Pyongyang; thus a major impediment in normalisation of diplomatic ties. Both the countries, however, seem committed to resolve the issue and have revived the talks which remained suspended since 2008. Japanese media reports suggest that if the two sides sustain their engagement and resolve the abduction issue, it may pave way to establishment of formal diplomatic ties between the two neighbours.

To resolve the abduction issue of Japanese citizens, top diplomats of Japan and North Korea have held a series of talks in Stockholm and Beijing during the last three months. In what may be termed a major breakthrough, in early July, North Korea agreed to set up a special committee to investigate the fate of the Japanese abductees. In return, Japan lifted some of the sanctions it has imposed on North Korea in 2006 following the latter's nuclear and missile tests. As part of their understanding, termed as "action for action" principles, Japan has lifted following unilateral sanctions:

1. Travel restrictions for North Koreans on visiting Japan.
2. Restrictions on remittances to North Korea exceeding Yen 3 million and cash taken to the country in excess of Yen 100,000 in value, both of which must be reported to the government.
3. Ban on entry into Japanese ports of North Korean registered vessels for humanitarian purposes.

Notably, it was the Shinzo Abe government which had imposed above mentioned sanctions on North Korea during his previous term in the office. These sanctions were in addition to the sanctions slapped by the United Nations. In contrast to his previous stance, Abe, during second term in office, has cited resolution of abduction issues as one of the top priority issues for his government, partly because the families of the abductees are ageing. Of late, Abe government has faced pressure from the abductees' families to resolve the issue, as they launched a series of public protests and submitted their representation before the government. Since the issue was humanitarian in nature, the US and South Korea, which were averse to Japan lifting unilateral sanctions, gave muted response over the initiatives by Japan. Seoul stated that it hopes that "talks will be conducted based on close communications between South Korea, the United States and Japan." The US expected Japan to resolve the abduction issue in a "transparent manner." They, however, feel that Japan's action would make the sanctions on North Korea meaningless and it will become difficult to persuade recalcitrant regime to abandon its nuclear programme.

Though officials in Japan term the Japanese move as a purely humanitarian gesture, critics believe that the thaw between Tokyo and Pyongyang does not remain limited to humanitarian issues; rather it is driven by political motives. Undoubtedly, both Japan and North Korea have their own reasons for engaging with each other. North Korea remains isolated from international community because of its aggressive behaviour such as testing of nuclear weapons and missiles. Moreover, it annoyed its most valuable ally China following execution of Jong Son-thaek, number two political figure in Kim Jong-Un regime. China has not held summit level talks with North Korea ever since Kim Jong-Un has taken over the administration and thus it feels further isolated. Similarly, Japan faces political isolation

from China and South Korea over differences on historical issues and territorial disputes as they have suspended political interactions with Japanese leadership. A rapprochement between Tokyo and Pyongyang may send a message in Japanese domestic constituencies that it is no longer isolated in the region. Thus, it will help boost Japanese Prime Minister's popularity at home which has been plummeting because of some of controversial decisions by his cabinet on security issues. As regards North Korea, it will bring some economic benefit to the pariah state as it is desperate to revive its dilapidated economy. The rapprochement may also fulfil North Korea's desire to normalise relations with Japan.

Within Japan, a section of analysts doubts that the re-launching of the investigation will yield substantive result. North Korea had promised similar probes in the past but it has not yielded expected results yet. Japanese government had presented a list of 17 nationals believed to have been abducted by North Korea in early 1970s and late 1980s. The estimate by the Japanese NGOs, however, suggests that some 470 people had been abducted by the spying agencies of the Hermit Nation. In 2002, the then Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi was successful in bringing back five abductees from North following his surprise visit to Pyongyang. The then North Korean leader Kim Jong Il, during the meeting with Koizumi, admitted of abduction of Japanese nationals. He also launched a probe and later informed Japan that eight abductees had died and the remaining four never entered into North Korea. The claim was not accepted by Japan which demanded fresh probes. The talks on the abduction issue had been suspended by Japan several times especially when North took belligerent steps and conducted missile tests.

The North conducted short range missile tests amid Japan-North Korea talks and close on the heels of Chinese President's visit to South Korea on June 27 and 29 this year. Japan did lodge its protest to North Korea over this belligerent action, but unlike previous occasions it did not suspend the talks. This is indicative of the fact that Japan is looking at some long-term gains and remains committed to engage the North. Amid the reports that several abductees are still alive, Japanese media is speculating that Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is planning a visit to North Korea to secure repatriation of the Japanese abductees.

Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida has stated in the Japanese Diet that a visit by Abe to North Korea may be one way to settle abduction issue.

If Abe indeed visits Pyongyang and holds talks with the top North Korean leader, that will mark the beginning of a new chapter in Japan-North Korea ties. A close look of Abe's move towards North Korea suggests that he is adopting a two-pronged strategy vis-à-vis North Korea. On the one hand, he wants to continue the trilateral coordination consisting of the US, South Korea and Japan to meet security challenges posed by the North, while on the other hand, he wants to take some out of box steps by engaging the North apparently to help moderate its aggressive behaviour. South Korean sources were suggesting that North Korea is preparing for the fourth nuclear test. However, North Korea has not conducted the test yet. It seems, Japan's recent overture towards North Korea has compelled Pyongyang to postpone the testing. It knows fully well that if it conducts further tests, Japan would rethink its strategy and this will lead to further isolation of the Kim Jong-Un regime.

Critics have blamed Japan for lifting the sanctions on North Korea as they believe that Japan's approach will undermine the international community's efforts on reining in Pyongyang's missile and nuclear programme. However, initial bonhomie between the two should not be seen purely negatively. Myanmar is the recent test case in the region; US-Myanmar talks changed Nay Pyi Taw's outlook and it realised the benefits of engagement with the world, and that led to political transformation in the country. Similarly, the talks between Japan and North Korea for resolving abduction issue may lead to improvement in bilateral ties, leading to further easing of sanctions and flow of Japanese economic aid to North Korea. The Kim Jong-Un regime in Pyongyang might also see the benefits of engagement with an economically vibrant neighbour and that might encourage it not to take steps that have led to its seclusion. Since the 'sticks' or harsher measures of sanctions and boycotts of North Korea have not yielded expected results, an alternative method of 'carrots' should also be utilised. Japan should be commended for taking up such steps; however, it should cautiously watch whether its engagement helps moderate North Korea's aggressive behaviour or further emboldens it.

**Dr. Shamshad A. Khan is Research Fellow at the Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.*

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