The potential of summit diplomacy to break deadlocks in seemingly intractable problems in international relations was on full display earlier this year, with summits between the leaders of South Korea and North Korea, and the historic summit in June between Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un, reversing, for now, what seemed to be a collision course between Washington and Pyongyang. The hard work, however, lies ahead.

ESSAYS BY
Introduction 8
Richard Feinberg & Stephan Haggard 10
Bridget L. Coggins 18
Jeffrey Lewis 24
Kuyoun Chung 30
Chae-Jin Lee 36
Toshihide Soeya 42
Can Abe Get Japan Back on the Korea Bus?  

By Yoshihide Soeya

In the current flurry of summitry involving North Korea, Japan has been the odd man out, with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe taking a generally hardline approach. That began to change at this year’s United Nations General Assembly, when Abe said he was prepared to “break the shell of mutual distrust” with North Korea by meeting Kim Jong Un. Yoshihide Soeya looks at the prospects for an Abe-Kim summit and how Japanese policy will have to adjust to make it happen.

AT THE UNITED NATIONS General Assembly on Sept. 20, 2017, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe outlined his hardline approach to North Korea in no uncertain terms. “Again and again, attempts to resolve issues through dialogue have all come to naught. In what hope of success are we now repeating the very same failure a third time? We must make North Korea abandon all nuclear and ballistic missile programs in a complete, verifiable, and irreversible manner. What is needed to do that is not dialogue, but pressure.”

A year later, on Sept. 25, 2018, the same Abe said at the UN General Assembly: “Japan’s policy of seeking to settle the unfortunate past and normalize its relations with North Korea once the abductions, nuclear, and missile issues are resolved will not change … In order to resolve the abductions issue, I am also ready to break the shell of mutual distrust with North Korea, get off to a new start, and meet face to face with Chairman Kim Jong Un.”

Apparently, this striking shift in attitude was caused by the three summits that took place in the first half of 2018: the Moon-Kim summit on April 27 at Panmunjom, the Moon-Abe summit on May 9 in Tokyo, and the Trump-Kim summit on June 12 in Singapore. Will Shinzo Abe, too, have his North Korean summit moment?

Perhaps encouraged by the success of the charm offensive during the Pyeong Chang Winter Olympics in February, Kim Jong Un declared a “great victory” for the Byungjin dual-track policy line at a Workers’ Party Central Committee meeting on April 20. This declaration meant that the North Korean leader would put a halt to the development of nuclear capabilities, if not denuclearization yet, and would concentrate on the economic development of the country. On the basis of this strategic decision on the domestic front, Kim Jong Un has embarked on a long journey toward creating an environment on and around the Korean Peninsula favorable for his regime security as well as economic prosperity.

The Moon-Kim summit and Trump-Kim summit were crucial kick-starters for this process.

The Moon-Abe meeting on May 9 attracted less attention, but took place as a side event of the 7th China-Japan-Korea (CJK) Summit in Tokyo. It was, however, an important occasion influencing Abe’s attitudes toward both South Korea and North Korea. According to an anonymous source, the initial half of the meeting, which lasted for a little over 40 minutes, consisted of one-on-one talks between Moon and Abe. Although the content remains undisclosed, one can reasonably guess that Moon briefed Abe about his discussions with Kim and Kim’s seriousness about his initiatives.

A week later, on May 15, Abe made an unexpected appearance at the 50th Japan-Korea Business Conference in Tokyo, and offered an opening address that hinted at a possible change in policy: “Last week, the Japan-China-ROK Tri-lateral Summit Meeting was held in Tokyo, and President Moon Jae-in made the first visit to Japan by the President of the ROK in seven years. Taking this opportunity, we also held a Japan-ROK Summit Meeting, where we once again confirmed that our countries would continue to build future-oriented Japan-ROK relations.”

The Japan-Korea Business Conference, attended by key business leaders and representatives of major companies from Japan and South Korea, has been held without interruption over the last 50 years; this was Abe’s first appearance.

Then came the Trump-Kim summit in Singapore on June 12. Although there were not many surprises out of it, just the fact that such a meeting took place was important — and it also provided a critical impetus for Abe to begin changing his attitudes, as seen in his address at the UN General Assembly in September.

GETTING ON THE BUS
The main discourse in Japan after these developments has concerned whether or not Japan missed the bus. Supporters of Abe’s hardline policy toward North Korea tend to argue that it has not, and that Japan can simply wait for the time when North Korea will need it. According to this view, Abe should wait until Kim Jong Un comes courting before seeking a Kim-Abe summit. In the meantime, pressure remains an effective tool, while dialogue is seen as a way for North Korea to deceive others, including not only Japan but South Korea and even Trump. A related point often made by this camp is that Kim Jung Un started coming out of isolation simply because pressure worked.

Under this premise, the Abe administration is also making a not-so-subtle effort to influence Trump’s policy on two main issues. One is, obviously, the abductions, but the actual effect of Trump reminding Kim of the issue is uncertain at best. The second is to see to it that Trump does not make concessions easily on security-related issues, in general, nor that he jumps at an agreement on ballistic missiles at the expense of Japanese concerns about short- and medium-range missiles, in particular.

Some of these points do not necessarily add up to a coherent argument, let alone a strategy. If North Korea has changed its approach toward the outside world because of external pressure, why is further pressure needed until Pyongy
seeks a helping hand from Japan? This premise lacks insight and fails to think hard about the path toward an Abe-Kim summit. Under current circumstances, it is also doubtful if an Abe-Kim meeting is high on either Moon’s or Trump’s priorities, even though they appear responsive to Abe’s plea to remind Kim of the abduction issue.

**Decoupling Abductions and Missiles**

Indeed, Abe has repeatedly expressed his determination to resolve the abduction issue during his tenure, and he links it to solving the nuclear issue. It is quite ironic, however, that the abduction issue is an obstacle for Abe to the realization of a meeting with Kim at which Abe wants to find a way to solve the issue. Kim Jong Un may still be ready to take up the issue in one way or another, as once indicated by the Stockholm Agreement in May 2014, in which North Korea agreed to conduct a comprehensive and full-scale investigation on the abductions. The priority for North Korea, however, must be to say the least. Kim Jong Un may be thinking of using a Japan card somehow, but the timing would be toward the end of the process.

If so, the key to the future strategy of Japan toward North Korea is whether Abe can decouple the abduction issue from the nuclear and missile issues, and take an active part in dealing with the latter. In doing so, Japanese public opinion is not necessarily an obstacle, as may be believed by many outside of Japan. Opinion polls by Nikkei in July 2018 indicated, for instance, that only 21 percent expect Abe to make progress on the abduction issue; 71 percent expressed doubts. This low expectation on the part of voters is not necessarily a bad thing in order for Abe to change his current approach, the bottom-line requirement is to assume that Kim Jong Un is serious about his long-term strategic goals to establish a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula as a means to guarantee regime survival and achieve economic prosperity. Whether denuclearization will be achieved in the process, however, is still uncertain.

What is needed now and in the months and years ahead is a strategy of flexible response with a measure of trust in Kim Jong Un’s proclaimed end-goals, backed by a firm resolve to denuclearize North Korea. There are always chances for dialogue among countries concerned. A resolution of the nuclear issues “on the Korean Peninsula … by promoting dialogues” has now become the premise of both South Korea and the US in their negotiations with North Korea.

**International Circumstances at the Time of the Declaration**

International circumstances at the time of the Pyongyang Declaration, however, were different from today. At the time, US policy was premised on distrust of North Korea and caused the eventual dismantlement of the framework of the Korean Energy Development Organization (KEDO), a creation of US-North Korean talks after the 1994 Korean Peninsula crisis. There are similarities between the policies of today under Moon and those of then-President Kim Dae-jung, but the US under President George W Bush had thrown cold water on Kim’s Sunshine Policy when he visited Washington in March 2001. At the time, the Six-Party Talks had yet to be institutionalized, and US policy pushed North Korea into a corner. Only then did Kim Jong II make a strategic decision to cultivate a slim route to survival through Japan.

Among the Japanese, including Abe himself, who accompanied Koizumi as Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary, this memory of North Korean concessions, even to the extent of Kim Jong II admitting and apologizing for the abduction of Japanese nationals, must be still vivid. The lesson was that pressure against an isolated North Korea works to the advantage of Japan.

**If North Korea Has Changed Its Approach Toward the Outside World Because of External Pressure, Why Is Further Pressure Needed Until Pyongyang Seeks a Helping Hand from Japan?**

This premise lacks insight and fails to think hard about the path toward an Abe-Kim summit. Now, however, the situation surrounding North Korea appears to be evolving in a quite different direction. Also, China has been working with North Korea closely, and Russia is also supportive of Kim Jong Un’s bold moves. Now Japan is the odd man out, advocating the most hardline position toward North Korea among the five parties. Under these circumstances, as stated above, Japan might well be a very low priority for North Korea. This is exactly why Abe started to change his stance in front of the UN General Assembly.

There remains strong underlying distrust of North Korea in many policy circles in Japan. In all likelihood, however, an Abe-Kim summit will be realized only if Japan gets seriously involved in the dialogue process where summity has become an important tool of engagement. In order for Abe to change his current approach, the bottom-line requirement is to assume that Kim Jong Un is serious about his long-term strategic goals to establish a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula as a means to guarantee regime survival and achieve economic prosperity. Whether denuclearization will be achieved in the process, however, is still uncertain.

Yoshihide Soeya is a Professor in the Department of Political Science, Faculty of Law, Keio University.