

The North Korean Crisis: Local, Regional or International? Implications for Japan

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INTRODUCTION

A contest is organized each year in Japan to choose the *kanji* (Chinese character) of the year. The winning entry in 2002 was "*kaeru*", meaning "return", for reasons that most people familiar with recent developments in Japan and in Japan's relations with North Korea would find obvious.

Indeed, on October 15, 2002, following the breakthrough of the Koizumi-Kim Jong II historical Summit of September 17, five Japanese made their first homecoming to Japan, 24 years after having been abducted to North Korea by North Korean agents.

Hopes were high at the time that a rapid process of normalization of the Japanese-North Korean diplomatic relations, including a comprehensive solution of the abductions issue, was within reach, paving the way to greater stability in Northeast Asia.

Those hopes, however, vanished soon afterwards, as in early October 2002, a U.S. high-ranking State Department official publicly disclosed the existence, or rather the continuation, of a clandestine nuclear North Korean program, in violation of the 1994 Agreed Framework.

Ever since, Pyongyang's nuclear brinkmanship diplomacy led to a dangerous escalation of the crisis on the Korean Peninsula, a crisis whose stakes are high and its outcome uncertain.

The North's nuclear brinkmanship kept holding the headlines of media reports all over the world in the past six months, but

actually there is more to this new crisis on the Korean Peninsula, than only its nuclear dimension, which remains however, the most critical and immediate.

Other ingredients should not be overlooked, such as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), the conventional military build-up considered to be the heaviest in the whole world, the humanitarian catastrophe of the reclusive communist state, where, according to various sources, between 2,000,000 and 3,000,000 people are believed to have starved to death in the past few years, a dictatorship repressive beyond imagination and a failed economy, equally dangerous if allowed to either survive as they are or to collapse.

The North Korean domestic ingredients of the crisis are, moreover, worsened by a less than favorable surrounding international environment. North Korea is situated in a volatile region where 100,000 U.S. troops are stationed and which is home to three of the world's largest economies.

A "*rogue state*", a "*sponsor of international terrorism*" and, above all, together with Iraq and Iran, a member of President Bush's notorious "*axis of evil*"¹ North Korea has much to worry about and, at the same time, much work to do to clean its image, to get out of its increasing isolation and to become able to enjoy the benefits of belonging to the international community.

Indeed, this is especially true, if taking into account that, basically, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, U.S. is a country at war, whose worst fears are terrorists getting their hands on WMD. We also have to consider and if considering the speedy and overwhelming military victory of the U.S. against Iraq, in a war in which U.S. primary military objectives shifted from disarming Iraq to toppling the dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussein and liberating the oppressed Iraqi people.

THE NUCLEAR CRISIS

Dictators, interested in nothing else than to perpetuate and consolidate their grip on power, have earned themselves the reputation of being highly unpredictable and Kim Jong Il is no exception to this conventional wisdom, but rather an unfortunate reinforcement.

No other country has been giving more mixed signals to the outside world, by alternatively displaying more conflicting, mutually excluding behaviors, than did North Korea.

This is especially true, if one examines Pyongyang's present negative, bellicose attitude in comparison with the positive steps it took until not long ago, which provided enough grounds for optimism and reasonable expectations for calmer days in Northeast Asia.

The North-South Summit of June 2000 was unanimously singled out by political and military analysts as the event which contributed to the greatest extent to an improved security environment in Asia-Pacific.

Within a relatively short period of time, North Korea was accepted into the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and established diplomatic relations with Australia, Canada and several members of the EU.

Positive steps continued even after the newly inaugurated Bush Administration reversed the North Korean policies of the

Under such complex circumstances, this paper argues that what needs to be dealt with is a multifaced crisis, with multiple local, regional and global reverberations, a crisis whose implications are far-reaching, whose stakes are high for all the major powers in the Asia-Pacific region and whose settlement requires a complex, multidimensional approach.

Furthermore, the paper will highlight the implications for Japan, both from the point of view of Japan's relations with North Korea and from that of the regional balance of power.

Clinton Administration, hardened its stance towards Pyongyang, undermined South Korean President's "*sunshine policy*" of engaging the North, thus angering Seoul, and included North Korea in the "*axis of evil*".

With the exception of one serious incident, the North-South naval clash on June 29, 2002, among the positive steps worthiest to be mentioned, is the meeting between U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell and the North Korean Foreign Minister, Paek Nam Sun, in the sidelines of the ARF Ministerial Meeting in July 2002. This has extended an invitation to an American delegation for talks in Pyongyang, proposing the highest level talks with South Korea in a year, agreeing to re-establish rail and road links with the South, clearing the mines in some portions of the demilitarized zone, sending its representatives to the Asian Games in Pusan (South Korea) and to the Asian Winter Games in Aomori (Japan), enacting some economic reforms and creating a Chinese-inspired special economic zone and holding a historical summit with Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi (which will be dealt with in a later section of this paper).

Even more remarkable seemed the fact that while traditionally trying to undermine the trilateral U.S.-Japan-South Korea solidarity and coordinated action, this time

Pyongyang appeared willing to abandon the "divide et impera" approach and to conduct a simultaneous engagement of Washington, Tokyo and Seoul.

Why did then things start to go wrong?

On October 5, 2002, James Kelly, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State, made a shocking announcement: after being confronted with undeniable evidence from U.S. intelligence sources², North Korea admitted the existence of a clandestine program of enriching uranium, which it was, however, willing to halt, in exchange for a nonaggression pact with Washington and for economic assistance. Newspapers caricatures showed Kim Jong II riding a missile on which it was written "Will not bomb, for food", but the U.S. took an intransigent stance of not being willing to reward bad behavior and of not bending to the North's nuclear blackmail.

In an apparent effort to do something to draw U.S.'s attention and to bring it to the negotiating table, Pyongyang embarked upon a course of continuous escalation and, constantly rejected any kind of multilateral framework for talks, insisting that was a problem exclusively between itself and the United States.

One of the most provocative actions taken so far by North Korea is the announcement, after the U.S. cancelled last December the shipments of 500,000 tons of fuel, that it would reopen its Yongbyon reactor. Which it did. The seals and surveillance cameras at its nuclear laboratories were removed, its spent fuel moved out of the storage facilities, with the aim of reprocessing it and producing weapons-grade plutonium, the AIEA inspectors removed it withdrew from the Nonproliferation Treaty, it threatened to stop abiding by the 1953 Armistice Agreement which ended the Korean war, and continued with the scrambling of a U.S. reconnaissance plane and the test-firings of cruise surface-to-ship missiles the first such

test right on the eve of new South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun's inauguration.

Tensions have been further heightened by bellicose statements added to these irresponsible moves, such as the North's announcements that it had long-range ballistic missiles capable of hitting the Western Coast of the United States, that it would transform Seoul and Tokyo into a "sea of fire", that it would regard any form of economic sanctions as a declaration of war, that Tokyo "should behave with discretion and remember all of Japan was within striking distance of its ballistic missiles", as well as by "translation mistakes" in the eve of the talks with Washington and Beijing, whereby it remains unclear whether it "started the reprocessing of 8,000 spent fuel rods" or "Is successfully moving towards that phase" etc.

Washington's response to these escalations was, on the one hand to continue to reject bilateral talks with the North, but to state its willingness to accept multilateral dialogue, provided that the North abandoned its nuclear development program, and, on the other hand, to repeatedly assure that it did not have the intention of invading North Korea, although, as the war against Iraq was looming up, in Secretary of Defense Ronald Rumsfeld's words, the U.S. had the military capability of fighting two wars on two different fronts simultaneously, and in President George W. Bush's ones, "the U.S. wanted a peaceful solution to the crisis, but all the options were on the table".

At the same time, U.S. officials warned the international community that North Korea already had one or two nuclear bombs and could get six to eight more within a few months, should it start to reprocess spent nuclear fuel, and strengthen the American military presence in the region, by sending stealth bombers to South Korea and ordering back aircraft-carriers which it planned to deploy in the Persian Gulf.

The U.S.-led war against Iraq provided further ammunition to the North's propaganda, in the sense that it now became the North's view that Iraq was attacked in the first place, because it allowed UN weapons inspections and it was defeated because it did not possess nuclear weapons.

Needless to say, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was not going to

INTERNATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

It is undeniable that the war against Iraq "shocked" and "awed" the North Korean dictator, who disappeared from public sight for about 50 days, first to analyze the United States' preparations for war, including the painful (and, possibly beneficial for the North) divisions within the international community and then the conduct of the military campaign, both in terms of strategic thinking and in terms of weapons used by the U.S.-led coalition.

Some, especially in Japan and South Korea, consider that Kim Jong Il went into hiding, after the first U.S. failed attempt to "surgically" eliminate Saddam Hussein and his sons, on March 20 and that it was precisely the shock of the fast American victory over Iraq that prompted North Korea to abandon its stance of insisting for bilateral talks with the U.S. and to accept "multilateral" talks in Beijing, with the U.S. and China, starting April 23.

Others hold the view that, now, with Washington's hands relatively free and attention likely to turn to North Korea, Pyongyang accepted the talks, only to buy more time and advance as much as possible into its nuclear development program, just to increase its bargaining power in the coming negotiations and extract the maximum extent of economic benefits, which might not come after all, considering the reminder of U.S. Secretary of Defense, just days ago, that *"there is no price that we are willing to pay that they are willing to accept to stop what they are doing"*.

make the same mistakes, but rather speed up its nuclear program and develop its only nuclear deterrent, the only way to avert U.S. "aggression" and a U.S. pre-emptive strike, but also another bitter lesson of the Iraq war, which taught Kim Jong Il that *"humans betray, weapons do not"*.

Regardless the motives behind Pyongyang's submission to U.S. requests for multilateral talks, the similarities between pre-war Iraq and North Korea are all too obvious to be ignored, with aggravating circumstances for the latter.

Indeed, belonging to regions where the U.S. has vital strategic, economic and political interests, what both countries have in common are the dictatorial regime, a deep hatred for America, membership in the same "axis of evil" and a record of producing weapons of mass destruction, still to be found in postwar Iraq, uncontested reality in the case of North Korea.

The only thing that plays to the North's advantage and also helps Washington to reject criticism of double-standards, is the fact that it does not have a record of violating UN Security Council Resolutions, as did Iraq.

After months of heightening tensions, dialogue is finally starting, although not in a format satisfactory to all the major countries which have stakes on the crisis in the Korean Peninsula.

Indeed, the April 23 talks in Beijing are a first round of dialogue between North Korea, the U.S. and China, although North Korea continues to claim that China is providing only the venue and the talks are exclusively between itself and the Americans.

Japan and South Korea were left out in the cold and so was Russia, although there are hopes that they could also join in the future.

But even though dialogue is starting, it should be assumed that for a while things will get worse before they can get better, considering the differences in the parties' positions.

Its start is however a positive development, because negotiations should be the way towards solving any crisis and because it finally shows Chinese involvement.

China, North Korea's only remaining friend, was so far reluctant to lend a helping hand to the U.S. and use its influence to determine Kim Jong Il to give up its nuclear ambitions, although it pleaded repeatedly for a non-nuclear Korean Peninsula (also in the form of a Chinese-Russian Joint Statement) and it showed some muscles to Pyongyang, by arresting the Chinese designated by the latter to head North Korea's first special economic zone and by temporarily closing, the tap of a pipeline supplying oil to North Korea, by invoking technical problems.

China has so far insisted that the problem was just between the U.S. and North Korea and it was Chinese opposition that delayed until April 9 a first round of discussions at the UN Security Council about the North Korean nuclear issue, transferred to it by the AIEA.

Indeed, a major problem for the U.S. is not as much a difference of opinion with the countries in the region over how serious the North Korean crisis is, but a fundamental difference of perception with the respect to the character of the crisis.

For countries in Northeast Asia, including U.S. strategic allies Japan and South Korea, the local character of the crisis tends to predominate. While being worried by the North's nuclear, bacteriological and chemical threat or by that of its ballistic missiles, they also have their own agendas (such as the abductions issue in Japan's case and, even if downplayed for political reasons, in that of South Korea) and they fear a collapse of the Kim regime which would flood them with refugees, would push the entire Korean Peninsula into chaos, would destabilize Asia-Pacific region as a whole, politically, economically and in terms of

security, would damage their economies and send shock waves to the entire global economy and, even worse, open the prospects of an American military presence in North Korea in China's doorstep, or, on the contrary, of a Chinese military presence in the North, for creating a buffer zone and preventing a tide of refugees from crossing the Chinese border into a region where a large Korean minority is living and about 100,000 North Korean defectors are believed to have already gone into hiding, to escape starvation and persecution at home³.

Just in between brackets, the economic effects of SARS in Asia, particularly, for the time being, in China, Hong Kong and Singapore, show how vulnerable national economies have become to viruses, health problems etc, not to mention military threats, so it becomes a rhetorical question to ask what would happen with stock exchanges in Tokyo, Seoul, New York and all over the world if North Korea made a nuclear test and introduced itself as a *de facto* nuclear power outside the international community.

The North Korean nuclear crisis has also another local/ regional dimension, that of legitimizing a nuclear arms race and a spiraling nationalism. Indeed, the prospects, even theoretical, of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan going nuclear are China's worst nightmare, while a nuclear-armed Japan would certainly sign the death certificate of the NPT in Asia-Pacific.

On the contrary, the U.S. sees the North Korean problem first from an international perspective, in terms of WMD development and proliferation (as proven by the North Korea-Iraq relationship, by suspicions that North Korea provided ballistic missiles technology to Pakistan in exchange for Pakistani assistance for its nuclear program or by Scud missiles shipments, though legal, to Yemen etc), although it pays also significant attention to its regional and local character, in light of U.S. major strategic interests in Asia-Pacific, U.S. military presence in the region and U.S. security alliances with Japan and South Korea.

This is why the countries in Northeast Asia were worried about U.S.'s hard-line approach and rejection of dialogue with North Korea and why Japan and South Korea made efforts to soften the tone in the Joint Press Statement⁴ issued at the end of the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group's reunion in Washington, in January 2003, that signaled a shift in U.S. policy and a U.S. more considerate of its allies' concerns.

At the same time, this difference of perception between the U.S. and the countries in Northeast Asia also explains why the U.S. has always insisted for dialogue with the North only in a multilateral framework, which nevertheless would be most beneficial also for the regional countries concerned, be it in the format 5+2 proposed by Japan (the permanent members of the Security Council plus Japan and South Korea), 5+5, proposed by the U.S. (the P5 plus Japan, South Korea, North Korea, EU and Australia), or any other format.

The three-way talks of April 23, in Beijing, might not be the best start, but they are a good one provided that fundamentally different positions of the parties involved would not push them apart from the very beginning. It is highly unlikely that a breakthrough would be immediately possible, the talks being rather the beginning of a lengthy process to defuse tensions.

By the time of the writing of this article, the outcome of the talks is not yet known, but there are indications that North Korea will press hardest for a non-aggression pact with Washington and for safeguards for the survival of the Kim Jong II regime, Pyongyang's, perhaps, most immediate concern, considering the fate of Saddam

IMPLICATIONS FOR JAPAN

In late August 2002, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi took many by surprise, by making an unexpected announcement: on September 17 he would hold a summit meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong II, in Pyongyang.

Hussein and the "Rumsfeld memo"⁵ allegedly leaked, a few days ago, to the American media and suggesting the U.S. should team up with China to oust Kim Jong II from power.

For its part, the U.S. is expected to grill the North over its nuclear program, to demand a full stop, not just a freeze, and, possibly to bring up Tokyo's demands for the solution of the abductions' issue, in line with a promise made on the occasion of U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral coordination talks in Washington right ahead the April 23 talks in Beijing.

At its turn, China is expected to urge the U.S. to show some flexibility and create an atmosphere that would allow North Korea to save face and facilitate its return to the NPT, China's most important objective for the time being.

Moreover, in a goodwill gesture (and, maybe, with the hope of playing again Washington, Tokyo and Seoul off each other, in case the Beijing talks go wrong), Pyongyang agreed to resume cabinet-level contacts with South Korea, in late April.

Also, in an attempt to mend fences with Russia, after letting it outside the Beijing talks, and possibly with the hope of bringing her in, in the future, North Korean dictator Kim Jong II personally attended the performance of a Russian choir, in what Japanese TV stations commented to be his first "moving image" in 67 days.

At their turn, the United States hope that Japan and South Korea, too, can join the dialogue, as soon as possible, along with other countries that could provide food aid, energy and other forms of assistance, should Pyongyang choose to behave responsibly.

The preparations for the summit were frantically followed by the Japanese media, which disclosed even the "acting directions" received by the Prime Minister from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Koizumi should avoid any kind of behavior that

could be afterwards exploited by the North Korean propaganda; he should limit himself to a simple hand-shake with Kim and avoid at all costs "bear-hugs" or greeting him with a bow, as customarily in Japan, not to enable Pyongyang to exploit the gesture as the bowing of the Japanese Prime Minister in front of the "Dear Leader"; no lunch invitation should be accepted, rather Koizumi and his suite should bring their own lunch-boxes from Japan.

In parallel, the media and, through it, the public opinion became overoptimistic about the prospects of Koizumi's plane bringing back home the Japanese citizens abducted by North Korean agents in the '70s and '80s, for it was clear for everybody that Koizumi would not have decided to go to Pyongyang, had he not been given some kind of assurances of progress in solving this delicate and politically volatile issue.

Live images from the summit showed a petrified Koizumi and the reasons became immediately known, to the disbelief of the families and the shock of the entire Japanese public opinion.

In a goodwill gesture, Kim Jong Il admitted for the first time that "*overzealous elements of the special forces, seeking recognition*" abducted Japanese citizens and, responding to the Japanese delegation's inquiries about 11 victims, he disclosed information about 14 abductees: there were no records about the entrance of one of them into the country, 5 were alive and the other 8 dead, including the very symbol of the abductions' issue, Megumi Yokota, abducted in November 1977, at age 13, from nearby her house, on her way back from badminton practice, and Keiko Arimoto, kidnapped from Copenhagen in 1983, at age 23.

Kim apologized for the abductions and informed that he punished the perpetrators. He also admitted, for the first time, the incursions of North Korean spy ships into Japanese territorial waters and, again, apologized.

Moreover, in the Pyongyang Declaration⁶ he settled for the term "economic cooperation", instead of "reparations for the

Japanese colonial rule in the Korean Peninsula", agreed to extend the moratorium on ballistic missile tests beyond 2003, to comply with the international law and not to take actions that would threaten Japan's security. Kim also gave a positive response to Koizumi's proposal to establish a six-party forum for security talks that would comprise North Korea, South Korea, Japan, the United States, China and Russia.

The Pyongyang Declaration had its critics in Japan, but, apart from the grief caused by the abductees' fate, Koizumi received high grades at home and abroad for his bold initiative, which showed unprecedented audacity for a Japanese leader and represented the first, exclusively, political, non-economic Japanese contribution to the security of Northeast Asia, after World War II.

Following the summit, North Korea provided additional information concerning the circumstances of the deaths of the 8 abductees and allowed the five survivors to visit Japan, temporarily, for the first time after their abduction. This temporary visit became, however, permanent, as Japan refused to send them back to North Korea, arguing that the abduction is a crime and it is unthinkable to return the victims to the offenders.

The first round of negotiations for the normalization of the Japanese-North Korean relations opened on October 29, in Kuala Lumpur, but the talks soon became deadlocked, over Japanese pressures for clarifications of the suspicions surrounding the deaths of the 8 Japanese abductees and requests of information on many other missing persons supposedly abducted by North Korean agents, and over North Korean insistence that, through Kim's apology, the abduction issue was settled, now being the time to open discussions on Japanese economic assistance, and criticism of Japan for breaking its promise, by refusing to return the five survivors to their families in North Korea.

Ever since, no progress has been achieved either with respect to the

abductions or with respect to deciding a new time frame or venue for a new round of bilateral talks.

At first, Japan, even after being warned by the U.S., privately (before Koizumi's visit to Pyongyang) or publicly, by James Kelly's announcement of October 5, about the North Korean nuclear program, concentrated almost exclusively on the abductions' issue, which domestically became a real political hot potato.

There were even suspicions in Japan that the Kelly announcement was especially timed to pour some cold water on what in Washington might have looked like an over-enthusiasm of Japan in hurrying to normalize its diplomatic relations with DPRK, just for the sake of solving the abductions' issue, without too much concern for the nuclear threat.

This is why, at first, the abductions' issue caused some friction between the two allies, aggravated by the fact that one of the five returnees was married with a former U.S. soldier who deserted to North Korea and who risked to be arrested and court-martialed by the U.S., should he have been allowed by Pyongyang to come to Japan to reunite with his wife.

Things started to change however, as the North Korean nuclear threat became more and more serious, as Pyongyang became ever more provocative and as the Japanese public opinion grew ever more hostile towards North Korea, due to the stalemate in the abductions' issue and to shocking revelations about the life in the Stalinist state, brought several hours a day in every Japanese home by the media, for the past seven months.

Japanese commercial TV stations were and are still fiercely competing with each other for exclusive interviews with defectors from the North, now living in South Korea, from all walks of life, from Kim Jong Il's bodyguards and relatives (in the meanwhile assassinated), to former diplomats, army officers, secret police members, dancers from the *yorokobigumi*, a group of dancers created especially for the dictator's

entertainment (and, reportedly, one of North Korea's best kept secrets) etc, who speak about unimaginable hardships, repression, starvation, cannibalism and camps for political prisoners where torture, rape and public executions are routine.

These interviews' impact on the Japanese public opinion was huge and, as a result the Japanese people approved a tough stance against North Korea by the Japanese Government which, at the same time, was compelled by the mounting pressure of the public opinion to harden its stance even more.

North Korea gives Japan a lot of headaches, since it is synonymous with abductions (now, believed in the range of 100 to 150), nuclear, chemical, bacteriological weapons and ballistic missiles threat, spy-ships, drug-trafficking, strong anti-Japanese feelings (present also in the South, but amplified in the North, by the state propaganda), unsettled historical accounts and an increasing number of North Koreans seeking political asylum at Japanese diplomatic missions in China, who embarrass Japan, internationally and domestically, by exposing the holes in its refugee policy⁷ etc.

The process of solving the complicated North Korean problem, with its most pressing nuclear component, is itself complicated and challenging and implies a lot of domestic measures, combined with diplomatic efforts, aimed at obtaining the coordination with and the cooperation of the neighboring powers, the U.S., South Korea, China and Russia.

While sometimes trying to promote a carefully crafted and balanced combination of containment and engagement and to apply "the carrot and the stick" policy, currently Japan, under pressure from the public opinion, opted for containment, especially through strengthening the Japan-U.S. security alliance and its own defense posture.

In terms of containment, Japan already plays a critical role, by providing bases to U.S. forces and thus ensuring U.S. power

projection. Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi enjoys a special relation with U.S. President George W. Bush, the hawks in the two administrations get along well and the war against international terrorism had already given Japan the opportunity to "*show the flag*"⁸

The war against Iraq provided a new opportunity for Japan to uphold its alliance with the United States, at a time when the trans-Atlantic rift was growing ever deeper and Washington was having a hard time in realizing how many friends it could still count on.

The Japanese public opinion was overwhelmingly (80%) against a U.S. intervention in Iraq and so was an important part of the political class, including segments of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party.

The Koizumi Government chose however to support the U.S., out of the need not to undermine the bilateral security arrangements and, thus, to increase Japan's vulnerability in the case of a contingency on the Korean Peninsula.

In his press conference of March 20, Koizumi explained to the public why Japan must support the U.S., "*the only country in the world that would regard an attack against Japan as an attack against itself and would shed the blood of its soldiers for the defense of Japan*", "*the country thanks to which Japan was able to enjoy peace, security and prosperity in the past almost 60 years*" and asked the Japanese people to support the Japan-U.S. alliance.

Moreover, Koizumi did not explicitly name North Korea, but skillfully used the word "*dangerous*", four times in the same phrase and asked the Japanese to imagine "*what kind of dangerous place the world would become, should dangerous terrorists get their hands on dangerous weapons of mass destruction developed by dangerous dictators*".

Grilled in the Diet by the opposition, for his support for the U.S. and for Japan's failure to act with dignity, like France and Germany, and to stop walking in Washington's footsteps, Koizumi repeatedly

explained that the security environment surrounding Japan was fundamentally different from that surrounding France and Germany, that the two countries were not exposed to ballistic missiles attacks and even if they were, they had their own capability to repel the attacks, while Japan had a hostile neighbor like North Korea, did not possess the means to shoot down incoming missiles and had to rely on the U.S. for its defense.

A culture of anti-militarism took firm roots in postwar Japan and, as a result, the Japanese people are sincerely hostile to violence and war, this being why, political analysts predicted that, because of the war in Iraq, Koizumi's support rate would decline with about 10%.

Their estimations proved eventually incorrect, since Koizumi's approval rate dropped at first, but only with about 2%, just to increase within days with about 6-8% (depending on the opinion polls), in parallel with a drop of the anti-war feeling of the Japanese people, from 80% to 59% and a rise in support for the Japanese-U.S. alliance. That is quite surprising, considering that, traditionally, support for the alliance remained high in times of peace, but dropped in times of war, out of Japanese disgust for war in general and fears that their country might be dragged into U.S. wars.

This demonstrates again how heavily North Korea weights on the minds of the Japanese people.

In parallel with the strengthening of its alliance with Washington, Tokyo took steps to increase its own defense posture, by resuming debates in the Diet on a legislative package about Japan's response to a foreign armed attack (which compared with the version abandoned last year, now also deals with large-scale terrorist attacks and spy ships incursions) and by launching its first two information-gathering satellites in late March 2003.

Moreover, Shigeru Ishiba, the Director General of Japan's Defense Agency, regarded as the most hawkish member of the Koizumi Government, sparked

controversy by declaring that Japan's Peace Constitution does not stipulate that Japan must stay cross armed and wait to die and by stating that Japan could regard a North Korean attack as imminent when North Koreans start loading the fuel to the launching site of a ballistic missile and would act in self-defense by striking the launching site after the start of the fuel loading process.

At the same time, Koizumi gave his subordinates the green light to study the need of improving Japan's missile defense capability.

Also, following American "pressures" and a deteriorating environment on the Korean Peninsula, Japan seems closer to announcing its decision about advancing to the development stage of a sea-based ballistic missile defense system (BMD), a project currently researched together with the U.S., started in 1998, after North Korea tested a Taepodong-1 ballistic missile which over-flew Japan and fell into the Pacific Ocean.

Indeed, when U.S. Under Secretary of Defense Douglas Feith visited Japan, in early November 2002 (followed by Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage in December), there were intense media speculations that the purpose of his visit was to push Japan to upgrade the BMD to the development level, speculations to which he replied that the U.S. *"is not pressing Japan for anything"* since *"one doesn't have to press Japan to recognize that Japan is facing a serious danger of ballistic missile attack"*⁹

The BMD issue came up also during Armitage's visit to Japan, during the "2+2" Security Consultations in mid-December in Washington, between the Foreign and Defense Ministers of the two countries, the first since the inauguration of the Bush and Koizumi Administrations, and during the visit, the next day, of Director General Shigeru Ishiba to the Pentagon and the U.S. Missile Agency, which reportedly impressed him very much and made him

declare that Japan was considering going to the development stage of the BMD.

This would be a logical thing to do, considering not only the growing uncertainty over North Korea, but also the recent tensions in the U.S.-South Korea alliance and the growing anti-American feelings in South Korea, which exploded after the acquittal of two U.S. servicemen who accidentally killed two Korean schoolgirls in June 2002, developments which Tokyo views with increasing anxiety.

In this respect, Japan's fears are far from groundless, since it would not be left unaffected by changes in the U.S.-South Korean alliance.

Indeed, there are several dangers for Japan, such as a damaged U.S.-South Korean edge weakening the U.S.-Japan-South Korea triangle, the main mechanism of dealing with North Korea, a "South Korean model" becoming a source of inspiration for pacifists or opponents of U.S. military presence in Japan or a reduction of the size of the U.S. forces in South Korea, which would increase either the already heavy burden of the U.S. troops on Japan or Japan's vulnerability to the North Korean threat.

Another source of concern, exposed by former Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone during a recent TV talk show, is an apparent policy shift of the new South Korean President, who stated in his inaugural speech that South Korea aims at becoming a central power in Northeast Asia, statement interpreted in Tokyo as yet another attempt by Seoul to distance itself from Washington, if taking into consideration that during the previous administrations, South Korea defined itself an Asia-Pacific nation, which implied, of course, its commitment also to the alliance with the United States.

Besides strengthening Japan's alliance with the U.S. and its own readiness, the Japanese Government announced its refusal to resume rice shipments to North Korea, under the pressure of the public opinion, in general, and of the Association of the Families of the Victims of the Abductions

by North Korea, which became itself a powerful pressure group.

In the meantime, the abductions' issue is starting to become international, family members of the victims paying two visits to the United States in less than two months (during which they met U.S. Congressmen, high-ranking officials of the Bush Administration and the American media and secured Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage's promise that the U.S. would not remove North Korea from the list of the states sponsoring international terrorism unless it solves the abductions' issue) and pleading their cause at the UN Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances of the UN Human Rights Commission, in Geneva, on April 22, after yet another memorable development: the adoption, on April 17, by the Commission of a EU-drafted resolution, co-sponsored by Japan, condemning North Korea for violations of human rights, including the abductions of Japanese nationals.

This is likely to lead to even stronger pressures by the victims' families on the Japanese Government and Ministry of Foreign Affairs to declare North Korea a "terrorist state" and to impose economic sanctions, requests echoed, also, by many nationalist politicians.

In parallel, some politicians began studying whether to propose legislation that would ban cash remittances to North Korea (from North Korean residents in Japan who own the profitable business of *pachinko* parlors, a vital source of cash for Pyongyang) and suspend the Mang Gyon Bong, a ferry representing the only direct link between Japan and North Korea, or institute severe control, after police investigations revealed that the ferry was used for cash transportation, for supplying delicacies to a dictator who is starving his people to death and for transmitting orders from Pyongyang to North Korean spies in Japan.

All these domestic constraints and external factors show once more how complicated the North Korean problem is for Japan and how difficult it is to try and solve it.

The process could benefit a lot from greater cooperation with China and South Korea, especially China which has the biggest leverage on North Korea.

Unfortunately, Japan's relations with both countries are far from smooth and are currently sailing through agitated seas, following another visit by Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, in January, to the controversial Yasukuni shrine, which shelters the spirits of Japan's war dead, including the Class A war criminals.

By choosing to visit it in January, Koizumi hoped to keep his promise of paying his respects once every year, as long as he remains in office and, at the same time, to do it before the inauguration of South Korea's newly elected President and the change in Chinese leadership, to minimize the harm to the bilateral relationships and let them start anew with the inauguration of new administrations in Seoul and Beijing.

Koizumi's calculations proved incorrect, however, as the new Chinese President refuses to meet him, even in the sidelines of international conferences, and agrees, in principle, with the idea of Koizumi going to Beijing, but only after "*an appropriate atmosphere*" has been worked out between Japan and China, with "*history serving as a mirror*".

In addition to the divisive issue of the Yasukuni issue, neither China, nor South Korea, but especially China, witness lightheartedly the strengthening of both Japan-U.S. security alliance and of Japan's own defense capabilities, especially the BMD, which Japan insists is purely defensive, but China suspects that, in U.S. strategic planning, it also has the role of protecting Taiwan.

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS

In December 2002, Japanese TV stations used an old tale to introduce the platforms of the two candidates facing each other in the campaign for the South Korean Presidential elections. The tale was about two powerful characters, "The Sun" (*Taiyou*) and "The Northern Wind" (*Kitakaze*), who were looking down to earth, to a little man wearing a coat. "The Northern Wind" told "The Sun": "*I am so powerful that I can do whatever I want*", to which "The Sun" replied: "*If you say you are so powerful, can you make that man take off his coat?*" That challenge seemed like a piece of cake for "The Northern Wind", but no matter how hard he blew, he managed only to have the man wrapping his coat tighter and tighter around himself. Seeing this, "The Sun" started to send his gentle, warm rays down to earth and the man took off his coat by his own free will.

The story is equally appropriate for the current nuclear stand-off on the Korean Peninsula and, also, for other of the many problems of North Korea.

President Bush's position of rejecting blackmail and of refusing to reward bad behavior is basically correct and his Administration's displeasure in sitting at the same table with representatives of a dictator that starves his people, and holds the entire region hostage, including 100,000 U.S. troops in Japan and South Korea, is understandable.

However, in international law there is a fundamental principle, called the peaceful resolution of conflicts, which implies that dialogue is the only option to avoid confrontation.

Therefore, in North Korea's case, too, dialogue is the only way out, for, no matter how unpleasant it might be, the costs and

the consequences of rejecting it might prove unbearable.

With the war in Iraq over, some predict, some fear another war, more catastrophic, against North Korea and recent media revelations (about new disagreements within the U.S. Administration, between the State and Defense Departments, or rather, between the two powerful men at their helms, or about the Rumsfeld plans aimed at the collapse of Kim Jong Il's regime) are too serious to be either ignored or, at least, underestimated.

The Korean Peninsula was once again on the brink of disaster in 1994, during the first North Korean nuclear blackmail.

The way out, then, was the 1994 Agreed Framework, which maybe was not perfect, but, nevertheless, averted war and bought Asia-Pacific, with the regrettable exception of stagnant Japan, almost a decade of explosive economic growth, peace and prosperity.

Now the Korean Peninsula and the entire region are in big trouble again and, while it is true that blackmail can not and must not be tolerated, one question, only, should be on the minds of the wise and the powerful of the world: "How else could North Korea be talked into taking off its coat, of its own free will, just like the little man in the "*Taiyou and Kitakaze*" old Japanese story?"

As for Kim Jong Il, time has come to ask himself how warm could he possibly feel wrapped ever tighter in his old, broken coat, if it became too cold outside and the wind blew too heavily? And an, unasked for piece of advice: "How about shifting from "military first" policy to "humans first" policy?" Weapons do betray, too.

Note:

¹ For the full text of President George W. Bush's State of the Union Address of January 29, 2002, see <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>

² James T. Laney and Jason T. Shaplen, "How to Deal with North Korea", in *Foreign Affairs*, March/ April 2003, Volume 82, Number 2, pg. 21

³ For various scenarios concerning the impact of the situation in North Korea on each major regional player in Northeast Asia, see the report "A Blueprint for a U.S. Policy towards a Unified Korea", released by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, in August 2002, available at <http://www.csis.org/isp/blueprint.pdf>

⁴ TCOG Joint Press Statement, http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/n_korea/nt/joint0301.html

⁵ The "Rumsfeld memo" was first referred to in the electronic edition of the *New York Times* of April 20 and quoted in all the Japanese major daily newspapers of April 22.

⁶ Full text available at http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/n_korea/pmv0209/pyonqvang.html

⁷ One such case was that of the five North Koreans who sought asylum at Japan's Consulate General in Shenyang, on May 8, 2002, largely reported by the international media.

⁸ "Show the Flag" was the appeal made by U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage to Japan, on September 18, in the aftermaths of 9/11, after reminding that during the Gulf War, it did "too little, too late".

⁹ Transcript of the "U.S. and Japan Discuss North Korea, Security Issues" Press Briefing by Under Secretary of Defense Douglas Feith, <http://www.usembassv.state.gov/tokvo/wwwwhsec20021112b5.html>

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