

# JAPANESE DISFAVOR OF NORTH KOREA REASONS, IMPLICATIONS FOR THE REGION, AND POTENTIAL STEPS TO MOVE FORWARD

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**Abstract-** The Korean Peninsula is located in close proximity to the Japanese archipelago, and thus relations among Japan, North Korea, and South Korea have serious implications for the security, stability, and economic well-being of the region. The Japanese public holds a nearly universal negative view of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, with approximately 97% of the public expressing an unfavorable view. This paper will explore the plausible causes of Japan's negative view of North Korea and the implications of such unfavorable ratings for the Asia-Pacific region at large. One major factor contributing to such a universal negative view of North Korea in Japan is the North Korean state-sponsored abductions of Japanese citizens. Accordingly, in this paper, there will be a discussion about these kidnappings of Japanese citizens. Additionally, North Korea has conducted provocative weapons testing, in violation of international law and threatening security in the region and to Japan in particular. Hence, a discussion of North Korea's nuclear and ballistic weapons will be included as well. The paper will then conclude with what the implications are for the region at large. For the purposes of this assignment, the terms "kidnapping" and "abduction" will be used interchangeably. The names "North Korea," "DPRK," and "The Democratic People's Republic of Korea" will also be used interchangeably as well, as will "South Korea," "ROK," and "The Republic of Korea. Whenever possible, multiple sources will be used to verify facts, and this paper draws extensively from a 2012 publication from the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs entitled "Abductions of Japanese Citizens by North Korea." Two illustrative images have also been included.

## 1. Introduction

The division of the Korean Peninsula remains one of the starkest reminders of the legacy of World War II and the Cold War. In 1945, the Peninsula was separated into two drastically different regimes. Presently, the South, governed by Seoul, is one of the world's most thriving democracies, whose citizens enjoy a high standard of living and many individual freedoms. In sharp contrast, the North, governed by Pyongyang under the regime of incumbent leader Kim Jong-Un, is one of the world's poorest economies and severely oppresses its citizens.

Across the sea to the east of the Korean Peninsula, the island nation of Japan takes a great interest in the affairs of both Koreas. Its relationship with South Korea, or more formally the Republic of Korea (ROK), has wavered throughout history. More shockingly, the Japanese public holds a nearly universal negative view of South Korea's northern counterpart, North Korea. Among those surveyed, 97% indicate that they have a negative view of North Korea, formally known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). On the other hand, the slight majority, though not an overwhelming majority, of Japanese express a favorable view of South Korea, with 56% expressing a positive view.<sup>1</sup>

What is at the source of this nearly universal disapprobation of North Korea in Japan? And why, even though both South Korea and North Korea shared a common history before the partition of the peninsula in 1945, is the public opinion on South Korea so much more favorable? One major part of the explanation lies in the North Korean state-sponsored abductions of Japanese citizens. Since the founding of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, North Korean state actors have kidnapped an estimated figure of over 180, 000 citizens of other countries.<sup>2</sup> A significant portion of these abduction victims have been Japanese citizens. Given the suspicious circumstances under which the victims disappeared, people living in Japan have understandably expressed concern for the safety and well-being of themselves and of fellow Japanese residents. Naturally, the Japanese public is not happy when ordinary citizens are being taken by force to North Korea to become Japanese language and culture teachers, film actors, and sushi chefs, among others. Worse, some are simply killed so that North Korean agents can assume their identities to work as spies.

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<sup>1</sup> "Publics of Asian Powers Hold Negative Views of One Another." Pew Research Centers Global Attitudes Project RSS. 21 Sept. 2006. Web. 22 Nov. 2014. <<http://www.pewglobal.org/2006/09/21/publics-of-asian-powers-hold-negative-views-of-one-another/>>

<sup>2</sup> "Taken!: North Korea's Criminal Abduction of Citizens of Other Countries." *A Special Report* 1 Jan. 2011. Web. [http://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Taken\\_LQ.pdf](http://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Taken_LQ.pdf)

With a population of over one hundred million people, not every Japanese citizen has been personally affected by North Korea's kidnappings. There must be other factors that account for the 97% disapproval figure cited above. With its possession of weapons of mass destruction, North Korea is likely the largest threat to security and stability in the Northeast Asia-Pacific region, further exacerbating the negative views in Japan. Furthermore, the very nature of the North Korean regime, its brutality and communist heritage, are in sharp contrast to Japanese ideals. Japan is an advanced, democratic nation. The DPRK, however, is far from being democratic, which also further propagates the negative views Japanese people harbor toward the Kim regime in North Korea.

## 2. North Korean Abductions of Japanese Citizens

North Korean agents have abducted scores of people, including Europeans, Chinese, and Japanese among others. The focus of this section will be on the Japanese victims.

A series of abductions perpetrated by North Korea state actors were carried out between 1977 and 1983, although North Korea's kidnappings were not limited to that timeframe. Most of the Japanese victims were in their twenties; however, the youngest Japanese citizen to ever have been abducted by North Korea was a young Japanese girl named Megumi Yokota in November 1977, at a mere 13 years of age.<sup>3</sup> The Japanese government officially recognizes 17 victims, while the DPRK only admits to 13.<sup>4</sup> Both of these figures likely greatly underestimate the true extent of the abductions. Private estimates from NGOs put the estimate as high as several hundred people who have been forcibly taken from Japan. Though the estimates and official statistics for how many total Japanese have been kidnapped vary, the public outrage does not. Active measures have been taken in Japan, both at the state level and at the grassroots level, to help rescue and resettle victims.

There are several possibilities and theories to explain the DPRK's motivations in carrying out these crimes. One is that the state needed Japanese language and culture teachers to train North Korean agents as spies. The historical tensions between Japan and the entire Korean Peninsula, including the North, are deep, and it would be much easier for North Koreans to spy on their Japanese counterparts if they have a strong command of the local language and knowledge of the culture. Some of the female victims were likely taken to serve as spouses for Japanese gangsters based in North Korea.<sup>5</sup>

Another possibility is that the North Korean state wanted to use the official identities of some of the victims, and thus it is also an unfortunate possibility that those victims were killed either immediately or shortly after their kidnappings. The tensions between the DPRK and ROK are even greater than those between Japan and the DPRK. Therefore, it is also possible that the reason North Korea wanted to use identities of Japanese citizens is so its agents could conduct espionage and propagate terrorism in South Korea by masquerading as Japanese.<sup>6</sup> Among the Japanese victims, of the 17 victims officially recognized by the Japanese government, five have been returned. The status and whereabouts of the other 12 are still at large.

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<sup>3</sup>"North Korean Abduction Victims Worldwide ." *NARKN*. National Association for the Rescue of Japanese Kidnapped by North Korea (NARKN), 1 Dec. 2006. Web. 27 Nov. 2014. <http://www.sukuukai.jp/narkn/>>/

<sup>4</sup>"Individual Cases - 17 Abductees Identified by the Government of Japan." *Abductions of Japanese Citizens by North Korea*. 1 May 2011. Web. 27 Nov. 2014. <<http://www.rachi.go.jp/en/ratimondai/jian.html>>.

<sup>5</sup> Koerner, Brendan. "Why North Koreans Were Kidnappers." *Slate Magazine*. The Slate Group, 27 Aug. 2003. Web. 22 Nov. 2014. [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/explainer/2003/08/why\\_north\\_koreans\\_were\\_kidnappers.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/explainer/2003/08/why_north_koreans_were_kidnappers.html)

<sup>6</sup> Associated Press. "The Stories of 12 Japanese Abducted by North Korea." *USA Today*. 30 June 2014. Web. 27 Nov. 2014. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2014/06/30/japanese-abducted-nkorea/11817197>



Fig. 1: Location of the 12 at-large victims at the time of abduction<sup>7</sup>

While the focus of this section is on Japanese victims, the case of two South Korean victims deserves special attention and illustrates the audacity North Korea exhibits when doing abductions. In perhaps the most absurd kidnapping of all, in 1978 Kim Jong-Il orchestrated the kidnapping in Hong Kong of South Korean actress Choi Eun-Hee along with her recently divorced husband and fellow actor Shin Sang-Ok. He then forced both of them into acting in films as part of North Korea's propaganda.<sup>8</sup> Kim Jong-Il was widely known as a cinephile, and Choi was reportedly one of his favorite actresses.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Japanese Backlash and Response to the Abductions

The fact that North Korea has led state-sponsored kidnappings of people from other nations, particularly in the case of Japan, has led to an erosion of the already low level of trust between the governments of the DPRK and of Japan, as well as led to justifiable public anger in Japan. When people first started reporting the mysterious disappearances of their friends, family members, relatives and other loved ones, Japanese authorities deduced that North Korean agents likely masterminded the suspicious disappearances of Japanese citizens. In response, at every meeting between the DPRK and Japan, Japanese officials brought up the abduction issue. After decades of lying and misrepresenting the facts, North Korea finally admitted at the First Japan-DPRK summit meeting held in Pyongyang on September 17, 2002 to the abductions.<sup>10</sup>

Those who have been personally affected – they had a friend or loved one taken as a victim – were understandably outraged, and a number of organizations were founded dedicated to raising awareness about the issue of these abductions. For example, the Association of the Families of Victims Kidnapped by North Korea, formed in 1997, and the National Association for the Rescue of Japanese Kidnapped by North Korea (NARKN) both collect intelligence on the kidnapping victims and place pressure on the Japanese state to take action. Also, a petition with more than 8.5 million signatures as of January 2012 had been presented to the then Prime Minister of Japan Yoshihiko Noda calling for active state measures to ensure the safe return of the victims.

These North Korean government-sponsored abductions affect relations between the DPRK and Japan at both the state level and at the citizen level. In terms of state-to-state relations, infiltrating another nation's borders suggests a certain level of disrespect for that nation's sovereignty and autonomy, and threatens border security. Also, the victims from Japan were ordinary, law-abiding Japanese citizens and are not subjugated to North Korea's laws, particularly because they were on Japanese territory when they were taken. Hence, it follows that North Korea

<sup>7</sup>Abductions of Japanese Citizens by North Korea. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. 2012.pg. 13

<sup>8</sup>Johnson, Adam. "Kim Jong-il's Sushi Chef Kenji Fujimoto." *GQ*. 1 June 2013. Web. 27 Nov. 2014. <<http://www.gq.com/news-politics/newsmakers/201306/kim-jong-il-sushi-chef-kenji-fujimoto-adam-johnson?currentPage=1>>.

<sup>9</sup>Gorenfield, John. "The Dictator Who Snagged Me." *Salon.com* RSS. 12 Mar. 2003. Web. 27 Nov. 2014. <<http://www.salon.com/2003/03/12/shin/>>.

<sup>10</sup>Abductions of Japanese Citizens by North Korea. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. 2012.pg.1

illegally seized people that its regime does not have authority over, which is yet another challenge to Japan's sovereignty as a state.

At the citizen level, the victims were all individuals who had families, friends, and loved ones. When Megumi Yokota was taken, for example, a mother and father lost their daughter and it is likely that some schoolchildren lost their friend. The loss of a loved one is painful for anyone, and it follows that those who have suffered a personal loss at the hands of North Korean agents likely hold a negative view of those responsible for their loss, which in this case is the North Korean regime. Even those who have not suffered a personal loss as a result of the abductions likely feel diminished trust toward North Korea and have more disapprobation of the Kim regime. If other innocent people had just been snatched under peculiar circumstances, they, too, are also at risk, leading to fear and distrust. This would then, in turn, be reflected in the overall general anti-DPRK sentiment in Japan. Even when the DPRK admitted to the abductions and permitted a team of Japanese investigators to investigate, officially-given information was dubious, inconsistent, and the remains of one of the returned victims were revealed to belong to someone else, as forensics experts revealed in Japan.

Also, North Korea has promised to commit itself to finding out what happened to the victims, but has not made good on its promise. As a result, Japan will have a hard time trusting the DPRK. Not only that, but North Korean officials refused to honor a Japanese request for an extradition of those responsible for implementing the illegal abductions, denouncing the demands as being of political in nature. It follows that North Korea did not punish those who committed these crimes and did not hold them responsible, much to the chagrin of friends and family members of the victims.

#### **4. Nuclear Weapons and Ballistic Missiles Testing**

The abductions certainly are a significant factor in the nearly universal disapprobation of North Korea in Japan. However, as previously mentioned, there are other factors that are likely contributing to such prevalent negative views. The Kim regime has not only committed crimes that harm people on an individual level, such as in the abduction cases above, but has also taken actions that threaten safety and stability at the state and regional levels. The regime is in possession of nuclear weapons, and has conducted three nuclear tests – namely in 2006, 2009, and 2013 – and the regime is currently threatening one more in response to United Nations' efforts to indict North Korean leaders in the International Criminal Court.<sup>11</sup>

To promote global peace and security, the International Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons was open for signature in 1968. The treaty's aim objective was to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and weapons technology. North Korea signed the treaty in 1985, then subsequently withdrew from it in 1993 and began a plutonium enrichment program at its Yongbyon complex. Not only does Pyongyang possess nuclear capabilities, but it also has access to ballistic weapons technology. It began receiving missiles from its ally, the Soviet Union, in the 1960s and presently it has weapons capable of reaching Japan. As of May 2012, North Korea has access to or is developing at least nine guided ballistic missiles, and by now has constructed more, and some of them are available for export. Not only does the Kim regime possess weapons of mass destruction, but if it exports them, the regime will be promoting state-sponsored terrorism beyond its borders as well.<sup>12</sup> These two factors put together do not bode well for outside favorability of the DPRK, especially in reference to nations that are within range of the missiles like Japan. North Korea's provocative weapons tests, coupled with the fact that Tokyo is a mere 1,000 kilometers or so from North Korea, or in other words, within striking range of Kim's weapons, have serious implications for stability in the region. Nearly 40 million people live and work in Tokyo's metropolitan area, and in the event of a missile strike from the DPRK, all of these people will be at risk. There is therefore little doubt: the DPRK's obsession with having weapons of mass destruction tarnishes its image and reputation on the international stage, and in Japan this manifests itself in the 97% disapproval rating among the public.

#### **5. Japanese Responses to Nuclear Weapons and Ballistic Missiles in North Korea**

Because Japan is in striking range of North Korea's stockpile of weapons of mass destruction, the archipelago is vulnerable to any potential attacks. As a result, Japan has made plans to acquire more weapons for its own protection to counter against North Korea. Also, Japan wants to establish a new marine force because of the security threat it perceives North Korea and even China as posing.

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<sup>11</sup>Choe, Sang-Hun. "North Korea Threatens to Conduct Nuclear Test." *The New York Times* 20 Nov. 2014. Web. 27 Nov. 2014. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/21/world/asia/north-korea-threatens-to-conduct-nuclear-test.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/21/world/asia/north-korea-threatens-to-conduct-nuclear-test.html?_r=1)>.

<sup>12</sup>Schiller, Markus. *Technical Report: Characterizing the North Korean Nuclear Missile Threat*. RAND Corporation, 2012. Print. [http://www.rand.org/pubs/technical\\_reports/TR1268.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/TR1268.html)



Traditionally, Japan has militarily been more of a pacifist nation. That is, it adhered to decades of a strictly defensive military posture. In recent times, Japan has indicated that it too will acquire offensive military capabilities, including but not limited to ballistic missiles, which it plans to potentially use to counter North Korea's aggression and carry out advance attacks on strategic assets belonging to North Korea.<sup>13</sup> Japan has even begun to look above the stratosphere in its development of strategic weapons. It has launched space-program activities, which have applications in weapons technology.

Japan levied sanctions against North Korea for its provocative weapons testing in defiance of warnings from the international community. Then, at the "Working Group on the Normalization of Japan-DPRK Relations" held in Hanoi, Vietnam in March, 2007, North Korea asserted that the abductions cases resolved, and that Japan should remove its sanctions against North Korea.<sup>14</sup>



Fig. 2: Yongbyon Nuclear Facility<sup>15</sup>

## 6. International Community Involvement in Resolving the Abductions Cases

Japan demonstrated a commitment to resolving the open abductions cases and securing the successful return and safety of Japanese citizens still held in the DPRK. Japanese officials have brought up the issue at nearly every diplomatic opportunity, including at the G8 Summit, and has thus garnered the interest and support of many other nations.<sup>16</sup> A result of the other countries sympathizing with Japan on this issue, the G8 issued a statement in the Leaders Declaration, which included a strongly-worded portion that urges the DPRK to resolve the abduction cases in a timely manner.

Countries such as the United States, South Korea, and even China, whose relations with Japan are often tenuous, have expressed support for Japan's position on the abductions issue at bilateral meetings. Leaders of these nations and many others have joined Japan in calling on North Korea to release victims and ensure their safe return, to hold the agents responsible for carrying out the abductions accountable for their crimes and bring them to trial, and to prevent any such case from happening again.

In November 2011, American Secretary of State Hillary Clinton expressed to Japanese Foreign Minister Koichiro Gamba that the United States was taking up the issue and that the United States was taking every chance to urge North Korea to resolve the abductions issue. The Republic of Korea has, likewise, provided support and cooperation in regards to the abduction issue. In October 2011, Koichiro Gamba recognized this support from the ROK and expressed his gratitude at the Foreign Ministers' Meeting. Likewise, in October 2011, Koichiro Gamba expressed words of gratitude to the Republic of Korea. Even China, North Korea's closest ally, has expressed disapproval at the DPRK's abductions of Japanese citizens. Shortly after the death of North Korean leader Kim

<sup>13</sup>Japan's New Military Buildup Seen as Response to North Korea, China | GSN | NTI." *NTI: Nuclear Threat Initiative*. 23 Aug. 2013. Web. 30 Nov. 2014. <<http://www.nti.org/gsn/article/japans-new-military-buildup-seen-response-north-korea-china/>>.

<sup>14</sup>Abductions of Japanese Citizens by North Korea. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. 2012.pg. 6

<sup>15</sup>Pennington, Matthew. "Institute: North Korea Nuke Reactor Likely Restarting." *NBC News*. 10 Sept. 2013. Web. 30 Nov. 2014. <<http://www.nbcnews.com/news/other/institute-north-korea-nuke-reactor-likely-restarting-f8C11134114>>.

<sup>16</sup>Abductions of Japanese Citizens by North Korea. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. 2012.pg. 8

Jong-II, the Japan-China summit took place and then Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao asserted that he advocates for improvement in Japan-DPRK relations so that the abductions issue could be resolved through official dialogue.<sup>17</sup>

The international support that Japan has received on this issue demonstrates that North Korea is alone in thinking it is acceptable to kidnap people using official state-sponsored means. A variety of countries, and even North Korea's main ally, China, have all unanimously condemned the DPRK for these crimes. Somewhat unexpectedly, the abduction issue has allowed Japan to strengthen its ties with other countries. If North Korea wants to improve its international image and reputation in the global community, it should make diligent efforts to resolve the abduction cases faithfully and transparently, or face more international backlash as well as the current low approval ratings among the Japanese public.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea is arguably the world's most isolated country, with few diplomatic relations and even fewer allies. It would therefore be in its best interest to normalize relations with Japan, particularly because Japan is located so close to the Korean Peninsula. During the Six-Party Talks, in addition to discussions about North Korea's nuclear issues, Japan consistently raised the topic of North Korea's kidnappings. One of the key steps to normalize DPRK-Japan relations is the settlement of the abductions.

### **7. Implications for Asia-Pacific Region at Large**

Japan's overwhelmingly negative views on North Korea carry with them economic and security implications as well. In terms of regional security, it is already a fact that North Korea possesses weapons of mass destruction. All states in the region, whether it is Japan, China, South Korea, or even Australia, would prefer that the DPRK disarm itself. Usually, diplomatic dialogue is the main mechanism by which states build trust with one another and encourage disarmament. In the case of Japan, when 97% of the public expresses unfavorable views on North Korea, it becomes much more difficult to normalize relations. Additionally, both sides would subsequently mistrust the other.

There are economic implications as well. In response to the DPRK's provocations, Japan has begun to acquire more weapons for its own protection. Estimates for the costs of missile defense systems vary, but ground-based interceptor (GBI) for missiles an average cost of around \$70 - \$80 million USD. Factoring in development costs, they can be as much as \$400 million.<sup>18</sup> While it is not guaranteed that diplomatic relations with North Korea can resolve the nuclear weapons issue, it would certainly increase the chances of doing so. These are large sums of money that could be used for many other economic activities, such as trade with other countries in the region that instead go toward missile defense systems.

### **8. Conclusion**

Ultimately, the kidnappings of Japanese citizens by North Korea, and the ballistic missile and nuclear weapons tests, have failed to promote formalized diplomatic relations between the DPRK and Japan. North Korean state-sponsored kidnappings of innocent, ordinary citizens in Japan demonstrate North Korea's blatant disrespect for Japan's national sovereignty and borders, the welfare and security of people, as well as complete disregard for human rights.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea remains one of the most isolated countries in the world. If it seeks to normalize relations with Japan, a major economic power located in close proximity to the Hermit Kingdom, North Korea would do well to fully own up to the kidnappings, making amends, and move forward.

Given North Korea's provocations – which range from criminal acts of abductions of innocent Japanese citizens, to nuclear weapons testing in flagrant disregard of international condemnation, and deceptions about involvement in these activities – it would be very difficult for the Japanese public to hold a positive impression of the DPRK. Japan and Japanese residents have been particularly affected by North Korea's behavior. In consideration of Japan's full range of economic, security, and stability interests, it is little wonder why such an overwhelming majority of Japanese residents have expressed their disdain.

This essay concludes by asserting that it would be in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's best interests to do the following:

- 1) Acknowledge the abductions and do whatever is in its power to resolve the cases that are still open;
- 2) Hold those agents who effectuated the kidnappings accountable for their crimes and bring them to trial;
- 3) Cease to stockpile nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, and put a halt to its uranium and plutonium enrichment programs; and finally,

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. pg. 11

<sup>18</sup> "Ballistic Missile Defense: How Much Does a GBI Interceptor Cost?." 24 July 2012. Web. 1 Dec. 2014.

<<http://mostlymissiledefense.com/2012/07/24/ballistic-missile-defense-how-much-does-a-gbi-interceptor-cost-july-24-2012/>>.

- 4) Engage in diplomatic and cordial bilateral discourse and relations with other nations, particularly those in the Asia-Pacific region.

The steps listed above have all been brought to the attention of North Korean leaders in the past with mixed success. Regardless, if North Korea seeks to bolster its international image as a responsible stakeholder in the region, increase its economic strength, promote its own safety, and improve its human rights record, the regime must implement in full all of the suggestions listed above. Among the many benefits that would come with doing the four steps above, North Korea would also earn back some trust with Japan and improve upon its 97% disapproval rate.

For a complete listing of the 12 victims still officially recognized by the Japanese government as being at large, along with their descriptions, go to pages 11 and 12 of the 2012 Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' report entitled *Abduction of Japanese Citizens by North Korea*. A PDF version of the report can be found directly on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website at [http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/n\\_korea/abduction/pdfs/abductions\\_en.pdf](http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/n_korea/abduction/pdfs/abductions_en.pdf).

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