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Can North Korea's Perestroika Succeed?

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By Wada Haruki

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WADA Haruki is emeritus professor of Tokyo University and a well-known specialist in modern Russian and Korean history and politics. He is the author of the monumental Complete History of the Korean War (Chosen senso zenshi), the product of decades of archival and interview research in Chinese, Korean, Russian, Japanese and English sources. During the military government period in South Korea, Wada was central to the movement in solidarity with the South Korean opposition, and played a major role in the campaign to save the life of political prisoners including Kim Dae Jung, now South Korean president, when they faced the death penalty. His most recent book is Do we want a Korean crisis? Reflections on the spy ships, the abductions affair, and the emergency legislation.

It was indeed a shocking confession and apology. Admitting that North Korea in the late 1970s and early 1980s had abducted 13 Japanese, of whom eight had died and five survived, Chairman of the DPRK National Defense Commission, Kim Jong Il, apologized for it.

It was admitted that 10 of the 11 on the list of suspected abductions published by the Japanese government had indeed been abducted. Yokota Megumi had been abducted, and so had three dating couples. Worst of all, the fact that 8 had died showed how savage state crime can be. It was astonishing to learn that Arimoto Keiko, together with Ishioka Toru, who is said to have been living with her, died in 1988.

Ever since the US declared North Korea part of the axis of evil at the beginning of the year, North Korea has been facing a deep crisis. There have been repeated cases of staged escapes of people fleeing the North by dashing into foreign consulates and the like, mostly in China. Among civic organizations receiving funds and aid from the US there has been open talk of an effort to drive the North Korean state to collapse by the stratagem of creating a large-scale flow of refugees, as occurred in Eastern Europe. At a time when resentment of North Korea in Japan was rising because of the spy ship intrusions, the suspected abductions blew up into a huge affair in March when the former wife of a person connected with the Yodo hijacking incident [March 1970, in which Japanese Red Army members hijacked a Japan Air Lines flight and went to Pyongyang, where the survivors still live] admitted in court that Arimoto Keiko had indeed been abducted.

At this critical juncture, the North Korean leadership resolved to try to achieve a decisive breakthrough towards reopening of negotiations and a settlement with Japan. Following the reopening of negotiations and settlement, crucial capital funds could be expected for North Korean economic reform and

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modernization. With the Kim Dae Jung government in South Korea coming towards the end of its term and the US adopting a hard-line policy, the normalization of relations with Japan constituted the best insurance for North Korea. Come what may, they took the view that Japan-North Korean relations had to be opened.

To achieve this, there was nothing for it but to respond in a substantive manner on the abduction issue. There was no other way to move the Japanese government, which had elevated the abduction issue to the forefront of Japan-North Korea relations. From Prime Minister Koizumi's agreement to visit North Korea, it can be assumed that already a quite substantial response had been prepared. Many people assumed that a resolution of the Arimoto Keiko problem probably constituted a part of it. I was one who thought that it could constitute a breakthrough. I suggested that if it were the case that she had been carried off from Europe by people connected with the 1970 Yodo hijacking, the North Korean government might be *willing* to release her. So, in my article for the South Korean paper, *Hankyoreh* (on 15 September) on the eve of the Prime Minister's visit to North Korea, I wrote that the problem of returning Arimoto and the two men living with her to Japan would probably arise. However, I also wrote that there might be some response on the case of Hara, or about the punishment of Shin Gwang Su, on which some evidence had already come to light. [1] I wrote that 'something may be said about the whereabouts of Hara or the punishment of Shin.' But I thought it unlikely that there would be any response on any of the other cases.

Recently I have been paying close attention to the abduction problem and participating actively in discussion concerning it. [2] Looking at the abductions case by case, with the exception of the Shin Gwang Su incident, there was not a single case in which there was sufficient proof to enable pursuit at the diplomatic level as an abduction case. Furthermore, in the case of Yokota Megumi there was a good deal of doubt about the evidence presented by An Myong Jin, a North Korean agent who defected to South Korea. There was nothing for it in these cases but to keep pursuing investigations in the category of missing persons. So I believed that even if the North Korean government were to move forward in a bold and resolute manner it would still not address these incidents.

However, whether Arimoto Keiko and Ishioka Toru died in an accident, committed suicide, or were executed, the fact is that they are now long dead. There is no way for them to be sent back. It seems that Chairman Kim Jong Il decided that the only thing to do was to bring everything into the open and apologize. Ordinarily states do not admit to their dark secrets but Kim Jong Il took the bold step of revealing his state's illicit activities.

Still, one can all too well imagine the feelings of the parents of Arimoto and Yokota. Naturally the families seek clarification of the truth. The DPRK government must make much more clear how the people were abducted and how they died, punish those responsible for carrying out the crimes, such as Shin Gwang Su. They must search out the remains and hand them over, and make it possible for families to visit the graves of the deceased and to meet with survivors, and for the survivors to return to Japan.

Despite all this, it is extremely important that agreement was reached at the Japan-North Korea summit to reopen the normalization talks and that basic principles were agreed for the deadlocked diplomatic negotiations. This is profoundly significant for the peace of Northeast Asia.

There are two issues in the Japan-North Korea negotiations. First is the settling of accounts for Japan's colonial rule of Korea that ended in1945. On this count, the 'Pyongyang Declaration' states that

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> The Japanese side regards, in a spirit of humility, the facts of history that Japan caused tremendous damage and suffering to the people of Korea through its colonial rule in the past, and expressed deep remorse and heartfelt apology. [3]

The gist of the 1995 statement by Prime Minister Murayama and of the 1998 agreement between Japanese Prime Minister Obuchi and South Korean President Kim Dae Jung was thus incorporated in the Declaration. It would be desirable for these words to be incorporated in the preamble to the Japan-North Korea treaty.

On the hitherto problematic point of 'reparations' to match the apology, Koizumi said he could not accept 'reparations' and proposed instead the Japan-South Korea treaty formula, according to which both sides renounce all property and other claims and the Japan side agreed to conduct economic cooperation. Chairman Kim Jong Il stated that for his part, out of 'readiness to resolve matters from the broad perspective', he was 'prepared to adopt the Japanese side's formula'. This was clearly a concession by North Korea. In any case it was understood that once the apology had been made, economic cooperation would be interpreted as Japanese conduct based upon the apology. There is likely to be some dissatisfaction about this among the North Korean people, but Chairman Kim Jong Il's concession seems to have been made after careful consideration.

It was also agreed that discussions would be held on the status of Koreans in Japan and on the return of cultural property.

The second issue in the negotiations between the two states was to put an end to the abnormal, hostile relations that have existed since 1945, and especially since the Korean war of 1950-1953, to confirm the establishment of regular state relations, and to seek resolution of all the problems that have arisen during this period. The abductions problem, and the spy ships problem both fall into this category. The 'Pyongyang Declaration' stipulated:

> Both sides confirmed that they would comply with international law and would not commit conducts threatening the security of the other side. With respect to the outstanding issues of concern related to the lives and security of Japanese nationals, the DPRK side confirmed that it would take appropriate measures so that these regrettable incidents, that took place under the abnormal bilateral relationship, would never happen in the future.

It is commonly accepted nowadays that normal relations means adherence to the UN Charter, non encroachment on the land or sea territory of other states, and the adoption of an understanding to jointly struggle against terrorism. A pledge not to engage in such activities henceforth is necessary. My proposal till now has been that both sides affirm that they will take whatever steps they can to redress the unhappy realities caused by their abnormal relationship. The terms of the Joint Declaration are quite straightforward.

Looking carefully at the content of Chairman Kim Jong Il's statements on this occasion, it seems to me that North Korea is not monolithic, and that there is considerable resistance to his reform line. The North-South summit meeting between Kim Jong Il and Kim Dae Jung (June 2000) was an epochal event, for which Kim Dae Jung received the Nobel Prize. It was hailed as a victory for the South's Sunshine Policy, although some may have been critical of the fact that nothing was gained by the North. Subsequently, Marshall Jo Myong Rok was dispatched to the United States. However, not only did it prove impossible to realize a U.S. presidential visit to North Korea, but the Bush administration sought revenge against North Korea for having pinned its hopes on the Clinton administration.

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Then at the New Year of 2001, Kim Jong Il announced the bold decision to reconstruct the economy using modern technology and to adopt 'new thinking'. Immediately afterwards, he visited China and showed his intent to pursue economic reforms. However, in no time at all the stress on 'new thinking' disappeared, and the newspapers were filled to overflowing with conservative slogans.

Amid tension between Japan and North Korea, a heavily armed spy ship sailed last December into the East China Sea and when chased by Japan launched an inexcusable attack. Kim Jong Il said of this mystery ship that a special forces unit was engaged in its own exercises. I had not imagined that it would go to such lengths and do such things. 'The special forces units are a relic of the past and I want to take steps to wind them up.' Some may take the view that he said this simply to escape his own responsibility, but when you consider the facts the situation was very grave.

With respect to its relations with South Korea, on the day of the match to decide third place in the World Cup, North Korean patrol ships in the Yellow Sea launched a deadly attack which sank a South Korean patrol ship. It was an act committed in defiance of Kim Jong Il's will. When this happened, the government of the North moved quickly to improve relations, expressed its regret over this Yellow Sea incident, and reopened moves to address the situation. Shortly afterwards, it suddenly adopted the shock therapy policy of price reform.

Then came the present moves. What these amount to is that the line pursued till now by all organs of the North Korean government has been completely turned upside-down. The Kim Jong Il government seems to be locked in life and death struggle with a conservative establishment. To some extent this is reminiscent of the Gorbachev government. Gorbachev, isolated as General-Secretary in a conservative Politburo, started reform in the area of relations with foreign countries. Reform then zigzagged back and forth, till eventually he was driven to the brink of defeat in a *coup d'etat* by the conservative faction. The forces opposing the Kim Jong Il government initiatives are the traditionalists who have an excessive loyalty to 'the great leader general Kim Jong Il'. If Kim Jong Il is to take the reform path, he will have to face inwards, and tell his people frankly what he has said frankly to the outside world. Following the North-South Summit talks I wrote that they amounted to an opening of the leader himself to the outside world. Now this meeting with Koizumi amounts to Glasnost to the outside world. Unless this process is now turned inward, it will be impossible to restrain the conservative political reaction, and it will be impossible to expand the 'new thinking'. However, if these efforts fail, 'the great leader' too will be in dire straits.

For Japan-North Korea relations to be established and economic cooperation undertaken will require that the atmosphere of openness to the outside world move inwards. These steps constitute an excellent opportunity to advance reform.

For Prime Minister Koizumi to have visited Pyongyang, met with Chairman Kim Jong Il, heard his explanation and apology for the abduction cases, expressed his own regrets and apology for the pain and harm caused by colonial control, resolved to reopen state-to-state negotiations and try to reach a settlement, given the circumstances he was in, was for him to face responsibility without evasion. That deserves praise. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs too, though enveloped in criticism recently, on this occasion may be said to have done well.

South Korea and Russia both seem to have strongly welcomed the outcome, but for the United States it was not a desirable outcome. In the case of relations between Japan and China, the Nixon visit to China came first, but in the case of Japan-North Korean relations, Japan has

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moved in advance of America. This is an epochal event in post-war Japanese diplomacy.

However, North Korea is a country that America has just recently declared part of the 'axis of evil', and it is the country which America will turn to deal with after the attack on Iraq. Although Japan has taken steps to restrain America, what it has done may in due course come to be seen above all as a helping hand. However, strong American pressure is likely to be applied to the Japan-North Korea negotiations, so the situation does not admit of optimism. It may even happen that Koizumi will face pressure to give tacit agreement to Bush's attack on Iraq in exchange for establishing diplomatic relations with North Korea. It will require the exercise of wisdom.

In any case, a basis for peace in North-East Asia is in process of construction through the establishment of diplomatic relations and the opening of Japanese economic cooperation between Japan and North Korea. Both in the past and in recent times much tears and blood have been shed between Japan and North Korea. Reflecting seriously on this past, we must make the best of the present chance.

[1] Shin Gwang Su was arrested in South Korea in 1985, carrying Hara Tadaaki's passport and other papers of Hara Tadaaki, who had disappeared in Japan in June 1980. Shin was sentenced to death, but granted amnesty in 1999 and sent back to North Korea. Japanese police have now issued a warrant for his arrest. Hara, it was recently learned, died in July 1986, allegedly of cirrhosis of the liver.
[2] Wada's two articles in *Sekai*, January and February 2002, were widely discussed.

[3] For full text (provisional Japanese Foreign Ministry Translation) of the 'Pyongyang declaration' of 17 September 2002: **www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/n_korea/pmv0209/pyongyang.html**

The Abducted Japanese, 1977-1983*

Dead

Arimoto Keiko, abducted Copenhagen (while studying in London), October 1983, aged 23, m. Ishioka Toru in 1985, d. 4 November 1988 (poisoned by gas from coal heater, together with husband and child); bodies lost in landslide August 1995.

Hara Tadaaki, abducted June 1980, aged 49, Miyazaki prefecture, m. Taguchi Yaeko October 1984, d. 19 July 1986, of liver failure (cirrhosis). With Taguchi, remains lost in flooding.

Ichikawa Shoichi, abducted August 1978, Kagoshima, aged 23, m. Matsumoto Rumiko, 20 April 1979, drowned (heart failure), Wonsan, 4 September 1979. Remains lost in July 1995 floods and dam burst.

Ishioka Toru, abducted 7 June 1980, aged 22, from Spain, m. Arimoto Keiko in December 1985, d. 4 November 1988. (See Arimoto, above).

Matsuki Kaoru, abducted 7 June 1980, from Spain, d. 23 August 1996, in traffic accident. Remains washed away in floods but subsequently recovered, cremated, and re-interred in common grave, 30 August 2002.

Masumoto Rumiko, abducted August 1978, Kagoshima Prefecture, aged 24, m. Ichikawa Shoichi, 20 April 1979, d. 17 August 1981, of heart failure. Remains lost in July 1995 flooding.

Taguchi Yaeko, abducted June 1978, aged 22, m. Hara Tadaaki October 1984, d. 30 July 1986, in traffic accident. Remains washed away in floods.

Yokota Megumi, abducted 15 November 1977 (Niigata), aged 13, m. Kim Chol Ju in 1986, one daughter Kim He Gyung b. 14 September 1987, d. 13 March 1993, suicide while suffering depression.

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Survived

Chimura Yasushi, aged 23, abducted Fukui, July 1978 (m. Hamamoto Fukie, November 1979 (see next entry), 3 children), translator in Academy of Science.

Hamamoto Fukie, aged 23, abducted Fukui, July 1978.

Hasuike Kaoru, aged 20, July 1978, Kashiwazaki, Niigata, m. Okudo Yukiko, May 1980, 2 children, aged 21 and 18; employed Pyongyang as translator in Academy of Science.

Okudo Yukiko, aged 22, July 1978, Kashiwazaki, Niigata, See entry for Hasuike.

Soga Hitomi, aged 19, nurse, from Sado Island, 12 August, 1978. m. former US serviceman in 1980, 2 daughters, aged 19 and 17.

* Compiled from media sources. Those names with marks alongside indicate couples, abducted together (and subsequently married). Of the 13 people, Pyongyang admits abduction of 7, but claims 5 went of their free will and one was spirited away with help from a Japanese intermediary. Pyongyang says two people responsible for the abductions, Chang Pong Rim and Kim Sung Chol, were tried in 1998 and sentenced to death and 15 years respectively. (Information current as of 5 October 2002.)

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