

Online Series

2024. 03. 25 | CO 24-24

Characteristics of Japan–North Korea Dialogue and South Korea’s Response Measures

Lee, Ki-Tae (Director, Global Strategy Research Division)

Since the 1990s, through analyses of important cases of Japan–North Korea negotiations, it has been observed that Japan maintains a typical ‘reactive’ foreign policy approach. Japan pursued its North Korea policy in response to South Korea’s active roles and changes in the international environment surrounding the Korean Peninsula. Moreover, the failure of Japan–North Korea dialogue since the 1990s to the present can be attributed to the weakening of the trilateral cooperation system between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan, North Korea’s nuclear development, and the abduction of Japanese citizens. Therefore, resuming negotiations between Japan and North Korea in the future is also expected to be challenging.

The development process of Japan–North Korea relations since the 1990s can be characterized as follows: Firstly, dialogue between Japan and North Korea began when the trilateral cooperation system between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan, as well as Japan–South Korea relations, were strong and consolidated. Feeling diplomatically isolated by the trilateral cooperation system, North Korea approached Japan. Through engagement with Japan, North Korea could consider the possibility of receiving support from Japan. North Korea also approached Japan as an indirect channel for dialogue

with the U.S.

Secondly, South Korea should play the role of a proactive mediator. Traditionally practicing ‘reactive diplomacy’ in foreign policy, Japan had limitations in engaging in diplomacy with North Korea independently. It was only by gaining understanding from South Korea and the U.S. within the framework of the trilateral cooperation system that Japan could develop diplomacy with North Korea. Particularly when South Korea pursued foreign policy and North Korean policy in an active and assertive manner in the international arena, Japan could exercise increased flexibility in its dealings with North Korea.

Thirdly, Japan engaged with North Korea when inter-Korean relations improved and peaceful atmosphere was created on the Korean Peninsula. Japan’s approach to North Korea based on reactive diplomacy, is greatly influenced by the developments on the Korean Peninsula and inter-Korean relations. If inter-Korean relations were to improve and South Korea can engage as an active mediator such as during the Kim Dae-jung administration, the possibility of Japan engaging with North Korea would increase.

However, given the current situation surrounding the Korean Peninsula, it is difficult to expect improvements in inter-Korean or Japan-North Korea relations. Of course, the possibility of a summit through informal contacts between Japan and North Korea cannot be ruled out, and Prime Minister Kishida, who is experiencing a decline in approval ratings, may view diplomatic achievements with North Korea as a breakthrough.

Nevertheless, Kishida, who hails from Hiroshima, which suffered damages from atomic bombings, strongly supports the principle of denuclearization of North Korea while advocating for a “world without nuclear weapons.” Furthermore, there exists a significant divergence in viewpoints between North Korea, which claims that the issue of Japanese abduction has already been resolved, and the Japanese government (or its citizens), who believes that all of the eight officially recognized victims of the abduction including Megumi, are still alive. Due to such substantial differences, it is unlikely that Japan-North Korea dialogue will be initiated in the short term.

With such outlook on Japan-North Korea relations, the South Korean government



must make efforts to boost solidarity with the international community on the issue of North Korea's abduction, which is a painful history to both South Korea and Japan, alongside strengthening the trilateral cooperation between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan for the denuclearization of North Korea. Furthermore, given Japan's prioritization of the Taiwan issue and its policy focus on a "free and open Indo-Pacific," it is crucial for the South Korean government to actively pursue foreign policy initiatives to encourage Japan's participation. In other words, it is now the time for the South Korean government to explore proactive policies for the involvement of Japan, a country traditionally passive and reactive in its approach to the issue of the Korean Peninsula.

©KINU 2024

※ The content of this article is the author's personal view, and it is not the official view of the Korea Institute for National Unification.