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Japan's policy towards North Korea under the Second Abe Administration

Abstract

The aim of this chapter is to examine the efficiency of Prime Minister Abe's hard-line policy towards North Korea under his second administration. The analysis is conducted through the lenses of neoclassical realism. Apart from domestic factors (Abe's "hawkish" convictions and anti-North Korean moods among the public in Japan), external stimuli will be examined, such as the US's sudden shift towards soft-power policy vis-à-vis Pyongyang under the Trump administration and its impact on Tokyo's foreign policy. It is argued that while ideological leanings of decision makers influenced the pace and intensity of diplomatic endeavors, it is the international determinants that delineated the general course of Japan's foreign policy.

Keywords: Japan, North Korea, Abe administration, foreign policy, neoclassical realism

1. Introduction

Since starting his political career in the early 1990s, Abe Shinzō has put much emphasis on conducting an assertive policy towards North Korea, both regarding the nuclear armaments problem and the Japanese citizens' abductions issue. The aim of this paper is to examine the efficiency of Prime Minister Abe's hard-line approach towards Pyongyang under his second administration. The analysis is conducted through the lenses of neoclassical realism. On the one hand, due to his "hawkish" stance, Abe was unwilling to agree to any concessions towards North Korea. On the

other hand, after depleting all economic and political pressure measures on Pyongyang, he started envisaging re-initiation of dialogue with the Kim Jong-un regime. Apart from domestic factors, external stimuli will be examined, such as the US's sudden shift towards soft-power policy vis-à-vis North Korea and its impact on Tokyo's foreign policy. It is argued that while convictions of decision makers influenced the pace and intensity of diplomatic endeavors, it is the international determinants that established the general course of foreign policy.

According to neoclassical realism, the stimuli stemming from the international environment are heavily filtered by peculiar domestic circumstances in a given country before they are translated into concrete foreign policy decisions (Rose 1998, pp. 144–172). In line with this approach, the general contour of Japan's policy was delineated by the external factors, such as relations in the US–North Korea–South Korea triangle. The article focuses on the analysis of the combination of hard-power and soft-power instruments employed by the Abe administration to resolve problems in contacts with Pyongyang, their evolution, and the changes in Washington's policy towards the Kim Jong-un regime. The first section briefly describes Japan's negotiations with North Korea until 2012, while two subsequent sections are devoted respectively to pressure and persuasion applied towards Pyongyang by Prime Minister Abe. It is argued that while Abe leaned heavily towards hard-power measures, the lack of their efficiency and the sudden shift in the US's approach against Pyongyang under the Trump administration forced him to display a more accommodative posture towards North Korea. Despite these changes, the abductions issue keeps hindering a breakthrough in relations between Tokyo and Pyongyang comparable to the one achieved by Seoul and Washington.

2. Japan's relations with North Korea until 2012

To this day, Japan has not established official diplomatic relations with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). This abnormal situation stems from the controversies over indemnities from Japan for the period of colonial rule, North Korea's state-sponsored terrorism, nuclear armament program and missile tests, and the abductions issue. Japan imposed sanctions on Pyongyang after an assassination attempt by North Korean agents against South Korean President Chun Doo-hwan in 1983 or after a terrorist attack on Korean Air Flight 858 in 1987 (Shigemura 2000,

pp. 64–71). In the 1990s, in turn, it was the nuclear program and missile tests that dominated bilateral contacts. In 1993 North Korea launched Nodong-1 missiles over the Sea of Japan and threatened to withdraw from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. Japan participated in financing the construction of two light-water reactor power plants in North Korea when Pyongyang agreed to suspend its nuclear program according to the 1994 agreement. Nevertheless, the Taepodong-1 missile test in 1998 once again reminded of the North Korean threat.

The problem that exerted a strong influence on Abe Shinzō's political career was the abductions issue. At the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, North Korean agents abducted a number of Japanese citizens, including a schoolgirl Yokota Megumi, to use them as Japanese-language teachers for spies or as spouses for foreign terrorists living in North Korea. In 1997 the families of the abducted established Association of Families of Victims Kidnapped by North Korea (*Kitachōsen ni yoru Rachi Higaisha Kazoku Renrakukai*) that gained strong backing from the Japanese public (Hasuike [et al.] 2010, pp. 34–54). Abe became involved in solving the abductions issue as early as 1988 when he served as a personal secretary to his father, LDP Secretary General Abe Shintarō. At that time, Abe's office was visited by the parents of one of the abducted, who revealed that their daughter was allegedly living in Pyongyang. In 1997 Abe and his fellows in the LDP established the Parliamentary League for the Rescue of the Japanese Abducted by North Korea (*Kita Chōsen Rachi Giwaku Nihonjin Kyūen Giin Renmei*). He consistently demanded imposing economic sanctions on North Korea to force the Kim Jong-il regime to return the abductees. When eventually five of the missing were released to Japan in October 2002, after Prime Minister Koizumi's historic visit to Pyongyang one month earlier, it was Abe who decided not to let them return to North Korea, thus breaking an agreement with that country (Abe 2006, pp. 44–59). This decision, as well as Abe's subsequent involvement in putting pressure on Pyongyang under the Koizumi administration, contributed to the popularization of Abe's image as a strong statesperson and thus laid the ground for his election as LDP president and prime minister in September 2006 (Żakowski, Bochorodycz & Socha 2018, pp. 88–94).

Only two weeks after assuming office, Abe had to react to a crisis situation on the Korean Peninsula. On October 9, 2006, North Korea announced the success of its first nuclear test. Japan's answer was immediate. Tokyo banned all economic exchange with North Korea, denying ships from that country entry to Japanese ports. Moreover, except for those who

had residential status, all North Koreans were prohibited from entering Japan (MacAskill & Watts 2006). Together with the US, Tokyo was one of the sponsors of UN Security Council's Resolution 1718 that was unanimously adopted on October 14, 2006. The resolution condemned the nuclear test, "prohibited the provision of large-scale arms, nuclear technology and related training to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, as well as luxury goods, calling upon all States to take cooperative action, including through inspection of cargo, in accordance with their respective national laws," and imposed "asset freeze and travel ban on persons related to the nuclear-weapon programme" (United Nations 2006).

As soon as Abe assumed the post of prime minister in September 2006, he established Headquarters for the Abduction Issue (Rachi Mondai Taisaku Honbu) in the Cabinet Secretariat, composed of all cabinet members and chaired by the prime minister himself. At the same time, the post of minister of state for the abduction issue was created, which was assumed by Chief Cabinet Secretary Shiozaki Yasuhisa. Moreover, one of prime minister's special advisors, Nakayama Kyōko, was charged with the same issue. In addition, in November 2006 Special Committee for the Abduction Issue (Rachi Mondai Taisaku Tokumei Iinkai) was established in the LDP Policy Affairs Research Council (PARC), headed by PARC Chairperson Nakagawa Shōichi. All these institutional changes indicated how great importance Abe attached to solving the abduction problem. The new government devoted additional funds for such activities as shortwave transmissions to potential abductees in North Korea or information campaigns among Japanese citizens. During a public meeting in Tokyo's Hibiya in December 2006, Abe confirmed that normalization of relations with the DPRK would be impossible without a complete solution of the abduction issue. Despite bold declarations, apart from initiating a series of investigations against the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Chōsen Sōren) that sympathized with North Korea, Abe did little to put pressure on Pyongyang regarding the abduction problem before stepping down from office in September 2007 (Hasuike [et al.] 2010, pp. 167–172).

Fukuda Yasuo, who succeeded Abe, held a completely different stance on policy towards the DPRK. Instead of putting constant pressure on Pyongyang, he wanted to persuade North Korea to re-initiate investigation on the abduction issue during a constructive dialogue on establishing official diplomatic relations with that country. Unfortunately, when this policy started bringing results, Fukuda resigned and was replaced by

Asō Tarō in September 2008. Asō generally shared Abe's stance on applying intense pressure on Pyongyang, and he reopened the meetings of the Headquarters for the Abduction Issue that had remained suspended under the Fukuda administration. This hard-line policy was not changed by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government after grasping power in September 2009. Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio even increased the budget of the Headquarters and nominated Nakai Hiroshi as minister in charge of the abduction issue, who was known for his strong anti-North Korean posture (*ibid.*, pp. 176–192). Eventually, the hard-line policy towards North Korea prevented any progress in resolving the abductions issue. During the Six-Party Talks, held from 2003 to 2009 with the participation of both Koreas, the US, China, Russia and Japan, Tokyo consistently treated further investigation on abductions as a prerequisite to any agreement regarding the normalization of diplomatic relations with Pyongyang.

3. Second Abe Administration's hard power policy towards North Korea

Approach towards North Korea constituted one of the crucial directions of Japan's foreign policy after Abe's return to power in December 2012. Not only did the solution of the abduction issue remain high on the prime minister's policy agenda, but just as under his first administration, soon after assuming office Abe had to react to a severe escalation of tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

After Kim Jong-il's death in December 2011, his successor Kim Jong-un instituted a series of provocative acts against South Korea, Japan, and the US. In mid-December 2012, Pyongyang successfully launched satellite Kwangmyŏngsŏng-3 Unit 2 that flew over Okinawa. The crisis escalated after North Korean nuclear tests on February 15 and March 7, 2013. In the following months, Pyongyang stated it was no longer bound by the Panmunjeom armistice agreement that ended Korean War in 1953. The regime announced restarting of a reactor and uranium enrichment plant at the Yongbyon Nuclear Scientific Research Center and closed the Kaesong Industrial Complex, where South Korean companies had been allowed to invest.

Japan led the international community in demanding a strong reaction to the abovementioned provocations. The Abe administration promoted Resolution 2087 that the UN Security Council unanimously adopted on

January 22, 2013. The document condemned North Korea's ballistic test from December 2012, called the DPRK to conform with previous resolutions on suspension of the missile program and nuclear armaments, as well as reaffirmed previous sanctions, including the travel ban and asset freeze against persons and institutions involved in the North Korea's nuclear program (United Nations Security Council 2013a). In addition, Resolution 2094, passed on March 7, 2013, demanded "that the DPRK immediately retract its announcement of withdrawal from the NPT" and introduced further restrictions on trade and financial operations with North Korea (United Nations Security Council 2013b).

All the time, the Japanese prime minister attached much importance to solving the abduction problem. During a speech in Washington in February 2013, Abe emphasized that a blue-ribbon pin he was wearing on his jacket reminded him every day that he had to bring back the Japanese citizens abducted by the DPRK (Stockwin & Ampiah 2017, p. 211). Minister of State for the Abduction Issue Furuya Keiji pointed to the same pin he was wearing during his speech in Washington in May 2013. As stressed by Furuya, Tokyo expected not only bringing back to Japan all of the abductees but also handing over of the perpetrators. Furuya expressed his opinion that the crisis on the Korean Peninsula should not hinder talks on solving the abduction issue for several reasons. Firstly, the new North Korean leader Kim Jong-un did not seem to have been directly involved in the kidnappings. Secondly, apart from Western powers, also China started exerting pressure on Pyongyang regarding the nuclear problem. Thirdly, high approval ratings of the Abe cabinet indicated that his administration could provide more stable political conditions for negotiations with North Korea than previous Japanese governments (Headquarters for the Abduction Issue 2013).

Japan's hard-line policy was generally consistent with the US's posture against North Korea. In response to the escalation of tensions on the Korean Peninsula, in April 2013, the Obama administration decided to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system to Guam. In addition, American B-2 and B-52 heavy bombers, capable of carrying nuclear weapons, began patrolling the skies above South Korea (Muñoz 2013). During the Japan-US-Republic of Korea Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Meeting in July 2013, all sides agreed to coordinate their efforts to solve the North Korean problem and to cooperate with China and Russia on that issue. They also "shared the view that they would not have a dialogue for the sake of a dialogue with North Korea, that it is important

for North Korea to take concrete and meaningful actions to demonstrate a serious intention of denuclearization, and that should North Korea take such actions a different path would be open to the improvement of relations with the three countries" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2013). Prime Minister Abe reiterated this stance at a summit meeting with President Barack Obama and President Park Geun-hye in The Hague in March 2014. He also "expressed his gratitude to the US and the ROK for their consistent understanding and cooperation on the abductions issue, one of the most important issues for Japan" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2014). Following North Korea's nuclear test on January 6, 2016, and satellite launch on February 7, 2016, Japan and the US supported UN Security Council Resolution 2270 that broadened the arms embargo on North Korea. The resolution prohibited that country from repairing and servicing weapons sold to third parties and introduced mandatory inspections on cargo from or to North Korea (United Nations Security Council 2016).

Even greater opportunities for creating a common front against North Korea with the US appeared after the election of Donald Trump as American president in November 2016. During the electoral campaign and at the beginning of his term in office, Trump emphasized the necessity of applying stronger pressure on Pyongyang regarding the nuclear armaments issue. In March 2016, he even suggested that Japan should develop its own atomic bomb to protect itself from the North Korean threat. In one of the interviews, in turn, he said that he "would get China to make [Kim Jong-un] disappear in one form or another very quickly" (Council on Foreign Relations 2016). In August 2017, President Trump used even stronger rhetoric against Pyongyang: "North Korea best not make any more threats to the United States. (...) They will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen" (Hamedy & Tseng 2018). Moreover, in his speech to the UN General Assembly in September 2017, among the crimes committed by "the depraved regime in North Korea," Trump mentioned the kidnapping of Yokota Megumi. He called Kim Jong-un a "Rocket Man" and admitted that if the US "is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea" (The Executive Office of the President 2017). In response, the North Korean dictator dubbed the American president "doltard" who "is uttering only what he wants to say." Trump immediately warned that "Kim Jong Un of North Korea, who is obviously a madman who doesn't mind starving or killing his people, will be tested like never before!" (Hamedy & Tseng 2018). This exchange of insults seemed

to indicate that the Japanese prime minister gained a powerful ally in applying economic, political, and even military pressure on Pyongyang.

Abe fully adhered to President Trump's initially assertive policy towards North Korea, and he invested a lot of time and effort in establishing a personal relationship with the new American leader. During the G7 summit in Italian Taormina in May 2017, Abe and Trump agreed "to put pressure on North Korea rather than to have dialogue with it" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2017a). During a summit in Mar-A-Lago in Palm Beach in mid-November 2017, in turn, Trump stressed that he stood behind Japan "100%" after the North Korean missile test in the Sea of Japan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2017b). What strengthened the bilateral alliance were the provocative moves by Pyongyang: the first North Korean intercontinental ballistic missile test in July 2017, launching of missiles that flew over Hokkaido in August and September 2017, as well as North Korea's first hydrogen bomb test in early September 2017. During his visit to New York in September 2017, Abe thanked Trump for his strong posture against North Korea and for mentioning Yokota Megumi in the remarks to the UN General Assembly. The two leaders "confirmed that the US commitment to defend Japan through the full range of US military capabilities, both nuclear and conventional, is unwavering and that Japan and the United States are 100% together" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2017c).

When on November 28, 2017, North Korea launched another intercontinental missile that landed in Japan's exclusive economic zone, Prime Minister Abe asked the UN Security Council to convene an emergency meeting. Japan, who presided over Security Council, was one of the leading promoters of Resolution 2397 adopted on December 22, 2017. The document introduced a ban on export to the DPRK of crude oil exceeding 4 million barrels or 525,000 tons and refined fuel exceeding 500,000 barrels during the period of twelve months. The prohibition also concerned machinery, industrial equipment, metals, and transportation vehicles. In addition, North Korea was banned from exporting food and agricultural products. All member states were also instructed to repatriate to North Korea all DPRK workers within 24 months (United Nations Security Council 2017). As stressed by Abe, "North Korea's nuclear and missile development represents an unprecedented, grave and imminent threat," and the international community "must not yield to any provocative actions and must remain united to enhance pressure on North Korea to the maximum degree in order to urge it to change its policies" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2017d).

As outlined above, Prime Minister Abe consistently conducted a hard-line policy towards Pyongyang. He not only promoted subsequent sanctions against North Korea in the UN, but also decided on suspending any exchange between that country and Japan. When Donald Trump was elected US president, it seemed that Abe gained a reliable ally in forcing Pyongyang to resolve the abductions problem and denuclearize the Korean Peninsula. On the other hand, despite many years of hard-power diplomacy against the Kim Jong-un regime, there was no progress in negotiations on any of the issues that hindered the normalization of relations between Tokyo and Pyongyang.

4. From the confrontation to the dialogue

Due to the lack of results of economic sanctions and political pressure on North Korea, Abe gradually started envisaging a more constructive dialogue with Pyongyang. Initially, he was persuaded to present a milder posture by his advisor, former senior secretary to Prime Minister Koizumi, Iijima Isao. Iijima claimed that a breakthrough in bilateral contacts would be impossible through bureaucratic-level negotiations alone and that using pressure without a dialogue with North Korean decision-makers was not constructive. In May 2013, Iijima secretly visited Pyongyang, where he met with the President of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly of North Korea, Kim Yong-nam. Iijima suspected that the fact that he managed to gain access to such top-class politician and that he was treated as a head of the state during his visit, indicated that the abductions problem remained unsolved and there were more abductees living in North Korea (Iijima 2014, pp. 104–124).

Iijima was unable to persuade Pyongyang to make immediate concessions, but his visit prepared the ground for re-launching Japan–North Korea Intergovernmental Consultations in March 2014. Eventually, the agreement between both countries was reached in Stockholm in May 2014. Pyongyang agreed to establish Special Investigation Committee and to start an investigation on all Japanese nationals in North Korea. In exchange, Tokyo lifted part of restrictions on visits of North Koreans to Japan, on reporting money transfers to the DPRK, as well as on the entry into Japanese ports of North Korean ships for humanitarian purposes (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2015). Nevertheless, this move did not lead to any progress in solving the abduction issue. In May 2015,

the Minister of State for the Abduction Issue Yamatani Eriko took part in the International Symposium on Human Rights Violations in New York, which included the issue of Abductions by North Korea. Minister expressed her disappointment with Pyongyang's posture and warned that "North Korea will have no future unless it resolves the abduction issue" (Headquarters for the Abduction Issue 2015).

While Abe's first attempt at constructive dialogue with North Korea was initiated by the Japanese prime minister's closest entourage, his second attempt was forced upon him by President Donald Trump. As was already described, during the first year of his term in office, President Trump adhered to a strictly hard-power-like approach towards North Korea. However, in March 2018, the American president surprisingly announced that he was envisaging a summit meeting with Kim Jong-un. This sudden shift in American diplomacy, not consulted with Japan, was a severe blow to Abe's hard-line policy against Pyongyang. It seemed that South Korean President Moon Jae-in, who vigorously promoted soft-power-like measures in relations with the DPRK, replaced Abe as the leading Asian advisor to President Trump. As a result, the Japanese prime minister was placed in an awkward position. On the one hand, he did not want to abandon his stance that no agreement with North Korea would be possible without resolving the abductions issue. On the other hand, if the US and South Korea achieved a compromise with Pyongyang on the nuclear armaments, it would be difficult for Japan to refuse rapprochement with the DPRK solely on the grounds of the abductions issue.

Under these circumstances, the Japanese government had no choice but to revise its attitude towards Pyongyang. Tokyo's embarrassing shift towards a more accommodating posture vis-à-vis the DPRK was reflected in press conferences of Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide. On March 7, 2018, immediately after it was decided that a summit meeting between Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un would take place at the end of April, Suga warned that "any response to North Korea should be fully based on the lesson that previous dialogue with North Korea has not led to denuclearization. Dialogue for the sake of dialogue is also meaningless. In order to engage in meaningful dialogue, it is of the utmost importance for North Korea to commit to abandoning its nuclear and missile programs in a complete, verifiable and irreversible manner, and to demonstrate concrete actions towards denuclearization" (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2018a). Moreover, he was reassured by US Vice President Pence's statement "that the United States will continue to apply maximum

pressure on North Korea" (ibid.). However, only two days later, after President Trump's surprising announcement of his plan to meet Chairperson Kim, Suga reported that Prime Minister Abe appreciated Trump's policy and accepted his explanation that the summit would be a result of the "maximum pressure" applied on the DPRK by the US and Japan. During a telephone conversation with Trump, Abe could only point out "that it was necessary for North Korea to demonstrate specific actions towards denuclearization in a complete, verifiable, and irreversible manner," and ask the American president for his assistance in solving the abduction issue (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2018b). During his visit to the US in mid-April 2018, Abe tried to persuade Trump to apply further pressure on Pyongyang. Both sides agreed "that North Korea must not be given any reward for merely engaging with other countries," and Trump promised to raise the abductions issue during his meeting with the North Korean dictator (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2018a).

Sudden detente on the Korean Peninsula forced the Abe administration to display a more accommodative posture towards Pyongyang. After the Inter-Korean Summit at the end of April 2018, Japanese Foreign Minister Kōno Tarō welcomed the fact that both leaders discussed the problem of denuclearization of the peninsula "as a positive development for the comprehensive resolution of outstanding issues of concern regarding North Korea" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2018b). At the same time, he urged Pyongyang to take "concrete actions for the dismantlement of all weapons of mass destruction, including biological and chemical weapons, and ballistic missiles of all ranges in a complete, verifiable and irreversible manner" (ibid.). Kōno confirmed that Japan sought "to normalize its relations with North Korea through a comprehensive resolution of outstanding issues of concern, such as the abductions, nuclear and missile issues, as well as settlement of the unfortunate past in accordance with the Japan–DPRK Pyongyang Declaration" (ibid.). During Japan–China–Republic of Korea Trilateral Summit in Tokyo on May 9, 2018, the three leaders welcomed the results of the Inter-Korean Summit and expressed their hope that the upcoming meeting between Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump would "contribute to comprehensive resolution of concerns of the parties for peace and stability in the region" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2018c).

At the end of May 2018, Tokyo admitted that it was hoping for a meeting between foreign ministers of both countries – Kōno Tarō and Ri Yong-ho – in case of a successful US–DPRK summit (Verizon Digital

Media Services 2018). On June 14, 2018, Kōno met his American counterpart Mike Pompeo in Seoul, who provided detailed information on the Trump–Kim summit in Singapore two days earlier. Kōno appreciated the US–North Korean agreement and expressed his gratitude for the fact that President Trump urged Chairperson Kim to swiftly resolve the abductions issue. At the same time, Kōno and Pompeo confirmed that both countries would continue to put pressure on Pyongyang to fully implement the UN Security Council resolutions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2018d). On August 3, 2018, Kōno Tarō briefly talked to Ri Yong-ho at an anteroom when attending ASEAN-related meetings in Singapore. It was believed that Japan was seeking the possibility of holding Abe–Kim summit at the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok in Russia in September 2018 (Kihara & Tajima 2018). During his speech at the UN General Assembly in New York on September 25, 2018, Prime Minister Abe admitted he was ready to come face to face with Chairman Kim Jong-un. On the next day, Kōno met with Ri once more at the UN Headquarters, conveying to him Tokyo’s readiness to resolve the issues of abductions and North Korean missile and nuclear programs in a comprehensive manner (Kiyomiya 2018). It is evident that Japan did not want to remain isolated over the North Korean issue, which led Abe to assume a softer stance towards Pyongyang.

5. Conclusions

North Korea has always been a problematic partner in diplomatic negotiations for Japan. The highly provocative behavior of Pyongyang on the international scene raised questions whether it would be more effective to approach the DPRK through political and economic pressure or rather through dialogue and persuasion. While such leaders as Koizumi Jun’ichirō leaned to the former approach, Prime Minister Abe consistently adhered to the latter. It was Abe who stood at the forefront of imposing financial sanctions on North Korea or freezing all trade with that country. Nevertheless, as projected by neoclassical realism, even he could not ignore the incentives stemming from the international environment. The inefficiency of solely applying pressure on Pyongyang compelled the Japanese prime minister to supplement hard-line policy with a more constructive dialogue through such emissaries as Iijima Isao. The real challenge, however, was a sudden turn in US policy towards North

Korea. President Donald Trump's surprising announcement of a plan of meeting Kim Jong-un forced Abe to tone down his "hawkish" posture. In line with the neoclassical realist approach, domestic-level variables, such as Japanese prime minister's convictions and his personal attachment to the abductions problem, constituted a severe obstacle in rapprochement with Pyongyang, but in the long run they were insufficient in opposing the stimuli from the international environment.

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