

A Japanese Perspective on Trump 2.0 and The DPRK Nuclear Issue and Peace on the Korean Peninsula

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Amid ongoing stagnation concerning the North Korean abduction issue, recent developments involving U.S. President Donald Trump have drawn significant attention. During his initial administration, Trump conducted an unprecedented summit with Kim Jong-un, General Secretary of North Korea's Workers' Party, during which the abduction issue was reportedly discussed. Trump's renewed presidency has reignited expectations of a constructive dialogue between the United States and North Korea, potentially influencing regional dynamics in East Asia, including Japan-DPRK relations.

Four months have elapsed since Trump's re-election, there is a high probability of renewed U.S.-North Korea negotiations. The current U.S. administration comprises key officials who previously managed North Korea negotiations under Trump's first administration, thus indicating institutional readiness. Frustrations over the previous Biden administration's inaction may prompt novel approaches, as indicated by reports suggesting internal deliberations are already underway.

Trump's recent statements, including explicit recognition of North Korea's nuclear status, also signify positive momentum. From Kim Jong-un's perspective, the previous summit represented a humiliating collapse; however, Trump likely perceives it merely as a temporary setback. Trump's pragmatic and unreserved approach may thus facilitate progress. Nevertheless, there is no immediate urgency from Washington's perspective, as the upcoming midterm elections next year incentivize the strategic timing of positive developments. Currently, the crisis in Ukraine demands greater immediate attention.

Conversely, North Korea has deepened its relationship with Russia, with Kim Jong-un likely confident in the strategic leverage gained through substantial sacrifices in supporting Russia's campaign in Ukraine. Enhanced coordination with Russia and China will embolden Pyongyang, elevating their negotiating demands significantly. Consequently, the U.S. will be compelled to define clear objectives for the negotiations.

Trump's interest in these negotiations appears driven by his aspiration to position himself as a peacemaker and his desire for accolades to bolster his political standing and personal legacy. His primary concern remains securing the U.S. homeland, potentially marginalizing allied interests.

Such motivations risk resulting in a "small deal," insufficient to meet the security needs of allies like Japan and South Korea. Given the absence of a moderating influence akin to former National Security Advisor John Bolton, who previously set high benchmarks for North Korea, there is a tangible risk of negotiations proceeding in a manner that neglects allied security concerns.

However, it would be erroneous to perceive Trump's diplomatic approach entirely negatively. Although Trump's diplomacy may be improvisational, intuitive, and narrowly self-interested, it can generate significant and unprecedented repercussions in international affairs, stimulating fresh diplomatic opportunities. This could potentially open avenues for Japan-DPRK relations, including the abduction issue. Progress could parallel developments in U.S.-North Korea negotiations, or, alternatively, North Korea may pivot toward Japan should negotiations with the U.S. stall. Multiple scenarios remain viable.

Whereas the Biden administration essentially maintained diplomatic stasis, Japan must proactively exploit the dynamics introduced by the renewed U.S.-North Korea dialogue. Practically, independent progress in Japan-DPRK relations remains challenging; thus, strategic alignment with U.S.-DPRK negotiations is crucial.

Regarding the conditions under which the abduction issue and Japan-DPRK relations could substantially improve, the most plausible scenario entails the establishment of a stable U.S.-North Korea relationship, prompting Pyongyang to seek a transformed international standing and emphasize Japanese economic assistance. Japan and North Korea share foundational commitments as outlined in the Pyongyang Declaration, which comprehensively addresses abductees, nuclear and missile issues, and envisages economic cooperation post-normalization. Resolving the abduction issue within this established framework remains the optimal approach.

Note: This is based on my interview with Niigata Ilbo, 25th of May, 2025.