

An Opportunity Lost: Why Japan and North Korea Failed to Establish Diplomatic Relations in the 1970s

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Abstract

North Korea is the only UN member state with which Japan does not have diplomatic relations. Japan-North Korea relations have furthermore been deadlocked for more than two decades over the issue of abducted Japanese citizens. The prevalence of the abduction issue makes it hard to imagine the possibility of good relations between the two countries. But in the 1970s, such a possibility did exist. This article reviews Japan-North Korea relations in the first half of the 1970s, a unique period when the conditions seemed ripe for the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. We investigate how this under-researched period in Japan-North Korea relations provided a realistic opportunity for diplomatic relations, why Japan nonetheless chose not to act on this opportunity, and what the period teaches us about the prospect of normalized relations between the two countries today.

Keywords: Japan, North Korea, South Korea, diplomatic relations, Cold War

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Atsuhito Isozaki, "Japan and North Korea," in *Japan in an Era of Geopolitics: A New Foreign and Security Policy Direction*, ed. Michito Tsuruoka (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Japan Office, 2024), 125-28.

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Ulv Hanssen, "No Thaw in Sight for Japan–North Korea Relations," *East Asia Forum*, September 17, 2022, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2022/09/17/no-thaw-in-sight-for-japan-north-korea-relations/>.

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Gavin Walker, *The Red Years: Theory, Politics, and Aesthetics in the Japanese '68* (Verso, 2020), 1.

Introduction

North Korea is the only UN member state with which Japan does not have diplomatic relations. Since North Korea's founding in 1948, there have been only two serious attempts at establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries, the first at the end of the Cold War and the second at the beginning of the 2000s. Both times, however, the process derailed over the issue of North Korean abductions of Japanese citizens.¹ In the early 1990s, North Korean negotiators denied Japan's abduction allegations and angrily discontinued the normalization negotiations. But in 2002, North Korea's then-leader Kim Jong-il admitted that North Korea had abducted 13 Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s and used them to train North Korean spies targeting Japan. Unfortunately, only five of the abductees were still alive, he claimed. When this information was revealed in the Japanese press, a powerful anti-North Korea sentiment spread among the Japanese populace. Under such circumstances, normalization of Japan-North Korea relations became seemingly impossible. The two countries have fundamentally different views on the issue. Japan claims that North Korea has abducted 17, not 13, Japanese citizens. Tokyo also maintains that, as long as Pyongyang fails to deliver credible evidence for the abductees' deaths, they are presumed to be alive. North Korea, on the other hand, says that it has apologized for the abductions and returned all the surviving abductees. North Korea maintains that it cannot do more than this and therefore considers the case to be closed, refusing to discuss the issue further. Since Japan sees a satisfactory resolution to the abduction issue as a necessary condition for diplomatic relations, Japan-North Korea relations have been deadlocked for more than two decades.² North Korea's development of nuclear weapons and missiles has further complicated bilateral relations, but it is the abduction issue that functions as the biggest obstacle to normalized relations today. At present, diplomatic relations between Tokyo and Pyongyang appear to be a nearly impossible prospect.

However, the extreme antagonism that characterizes the bilateral relationship today has not always been present. This article analyzes one particularly interesting but often overlooked period which had potential for bilateral rapprochement: the early 1970s. This was a period when domestic and international changes aligned to create a seemingly perfect atmosphere for diplomatic relations between Japan and North Korea. The Cold War was turning toward détente and North Korea was eyeing deeper relations with the non-communist world. Its new six-year economic plan required massive inputs of advanced machinery and technology that Japanese companies could provide. This made the Japanese business community interested in trade relations with North Korea. At the same time, the radical winds of the early 1970s led many left-wing advocates in Japan to push for relations with communist countries such as North Korea. The Japanese government thus found itself under pressure from an unlikely alliance between the corporate sector and the political left to normalize relations with Pyongyang. But despite these favorable circumstances in the 1970s, diplomatic relations between the two countries never materialized. By the mid-1970s, the window of opportunity for diplomatic relations had narrowed considerably as North Korea's serious economic problems dampened the interest of Japan's corporate investors and the left-wing radicalism of Japan's "long '68" was beginning to fade and countries like North Korea lost their appeal to Japan's younger generations.³ But in the approximate time span of 1970-1975

there appeared to be a realistic opportunity for normalization of Japan-North Korea relations. Our research question is therefore as follows: Despite the emergence of unusually favorable conditions, why did Japan refrain from establishing diplomatic relations with North Korea in the early 1970s?

In this article, we first lay out the various factors that made diplomatic relations between Tokyo and Pyongyang possible in the first half of the 1970s before we explain why Tokyo ultimately chose not to act on this possibility. In order to add social relevance to the study, we finally try to map out some of the implications of this historical analysis for contemporary Japan-North Korea relations. We present two mutually exclusive readings of this history, one pessimistic and one optimistic. The pessimistic reading draws the lesson that if diplomatic relations did not materialize under the ideal conditions of the early 1970s, they are virtually impossible to realize under today's far less ideal conditions. The optimistic reading, to which we ourselves subscribe, holds that the contemporary situation, for structural reasons, might actually be more conducive to normalized Japan-North Korea relations than the seemingly opportune 1970s.

The Early 1970s: A Window of Opportunity for Japan-North Korea Diplomatic Relations

The first half of the 1970s saw the occurrence of numerous structural changes that made Japan-North Korea diplomatic relations a greater possibility than before. In this section, we will explore these structural changes in the early 1970s before we, in the next section, explain why diplomatic relations with North Korea ultimately were not pursued by Japan. “Structural changes” here refer to shifts in the Cold War structure as well as shifts in the domestic conditions or foreign policies of key states that featured prominently in Japanese policy considerations. We identify seven such changes in the period of analysis. Taken together, these new enabling factors offered Japan a unique opportunity, or even incentive, to normalize relations with Pyongyang in the early 1970s.

1. Cold War Détente and North-South Dialogue

The early 1970s constituted a period of Cold War détente as ideological competition slowly gave way to pragmatic interaction and, indeed, cooperation across the Iron Curtain. In 1970, West Germany launched its reconciliatory Ostpolitik toward East Germany. In 1972, the US and the Soviet Union signed the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) aimed at reducing the two states' nuclear arsenals. In the same year, US President Richard Nixon made his historic visit to Beijing for talks with Chairman Mao Zedong, laying the groundwork for rapprochement between the US and China. This development also paved the way for the opening of diplomatic relations between Japan and China. The Cold War thaw also reached the Korean Peninsula. Red Cross delegations from North and South Korea held several rounds of talks in 1971 and 1972. These talks, which were the first official talks between the two states since the Korean War, paved the way for the July 4 North-South Joint Communiqué of 1972. This document laid out basic points of agreement relating to unification. In this atmosphere of détente and decreased ideological conflict, cross-curtain contacts and even diplomatic relations became less controversial. Jung Hyun Shin has noted that “the meeting of representatives of

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Jung Hyun Shin, "Japanese-North Korean Relations in the 1970s: From a Linkage Politics Perspective," *Asian Perspective* 4, no. 1 (1980): 95.

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Office of the Historian, "Memorandum from John Hoolidge of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, March 1, 1973," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume XII, State Department*, March 1, 1973, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve12/d233>.

6

The "Nixon Doctrine" refers to President Nixon's declaration in 1969 that American allies are primarily responsible for their own defense and should not overly rely on the US. The 1971 "Nixon shock" refers to Nixon's decision to end the US dollar's convertibility to gold, thus introducing a floating exchange rate system, while the 1972 "Nixon shock" refers to his historic meeting with Mao Zedong in Beijing and the subsequent rapprochement between Washington and Beijing.

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Ulv Hanssen, Erik Isaksson and Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein, "Sweden's Path to Diplomatic Relations with North Korea, 1950-73," *Cold War History* (2026), published online ahead of print. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2025.2557493>.

both sides' Red Cross Societies in 1971, had significant impact on the improvement of bilateral relations between Japan and North Korea," as such improvement in inter-Korean relations had long been seen as a prerequisite for improvement of Tokyo's relations with Pyongyang.⁴ Another important consequence of the historic talks between North and South Korea was the apparent shift in the US' stance on third-party contacts with North Korea. While the US had traditionally opposed such contacts, it now seemingly became much less averse to them. US Secretary of State William P. Rodgers stated in a 1973 conversation with South Korean Foreign Minister Kim Yong-shik that "it has become more difficult in the past year as North Korea has moderated its hostility to continue to tell other countries to desist from contacts with North Korea."⁵ This relaxed US position made it less risky for Japan, which strongly valued its relations with the US, to pursue diplomatic relations with North Korea. Given Japan's notoriously close alignment with the US in the Cold War, it is hard to imagine Japan recognizing North Korea without American approval. This change in Washington's position might therefore be considered as the most significant enabling factor.

2. The Watergate Scandal and US Preoccupation with Domestic Politics

Détente was not the only reason why the US reduced its efforts to prevent allies from approaching North Korea. This development was also partly a result of the Nixon administration getting bogged down in the Watergate scandal between 1972 and Nixon's resignation in 1974. Initially, the Nixon administration undertook changes to American foreign policy that had enormous, global ramifications, such as the "Nixon Doctrine" of 1969 and the "Nixon shocks" of 1971 and 1972.⁶ However, during the Watergate years, the Nixon administration quickly shifted its attention from foreign policy to domestic politics where it had its hands full with defending itself. With the exception of the Vietnam War, which was also going badly, the US paid unusually little attention to foreign policy after 1972. If Japan had tried to pursue diplomatic relations with North Korea during this period, it is unlikely that the US would have had the surplus political capital to prevent it from doing so. This is evidenced by the fact that all the Nordic countries (Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland) established diplomatic relations with North Korea in 1973, becoming the first Western states to do so.⁷ Preoccupied with domestic politics, the Nixon administration did nothing to stop them. It is therefore plausible that Japan could have normalized relations with North Korea without serious reprimands or pushback from the US in this period.

3. North Korea's Diplomatic Charm Offensive

A third factor working in favor of Japan-North Korea relations in the early 1970s was North Korea's energetic charm offensive towards countries outside the communist bloc in pursuit of more varied diplomatic relations. This was a part of North Korea's intense legitimacy contest with South Korea. The number of diplomatic relations was an important metric in the two Koreas' respective claims to be the sole, legitimate government on the peninsula. In the early 1970s, North Korea strongly increased its efforts to normalize relations with new countries, especially the newly independent ex-colonies among which North Korea had a favorable reputation due to its incessant rhetoric about anti-colonialism and anti-

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Chong-Ki Choi, "The Korean Question in the United Nations," *Verfassung und Recht in Übersee/Law and Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America* 8, no. 3 (1975): 399.

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Tai Sung An, *North Korea in Transition: From Dictatorship to Dynasty* (Greenwood Press, 1983), 90.

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Chae-Jin Lee, "The Direction of South Korea's Foreign Policy," *Korean Studies* 2, no. 1 (1978): 101.

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Compiled from data available at NCNK, "DPRK Diplomatic Relations," *The National Committee on North Korea (NCNK)*, August 2016, updated June 2024, <https://www.ncnk.org/resources/briefing-papers/all-briefing-papers/dprk-diplomatic-relations>.

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Donald S. Zagoria and Young Kun Kim, "North Korea and the Major Powers," *Asian Survey* 15, no. 12 (1975): 1022.

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An, *North Korea in Transition*, 91; Shin, "Japanese-North Korean Relations," 87.

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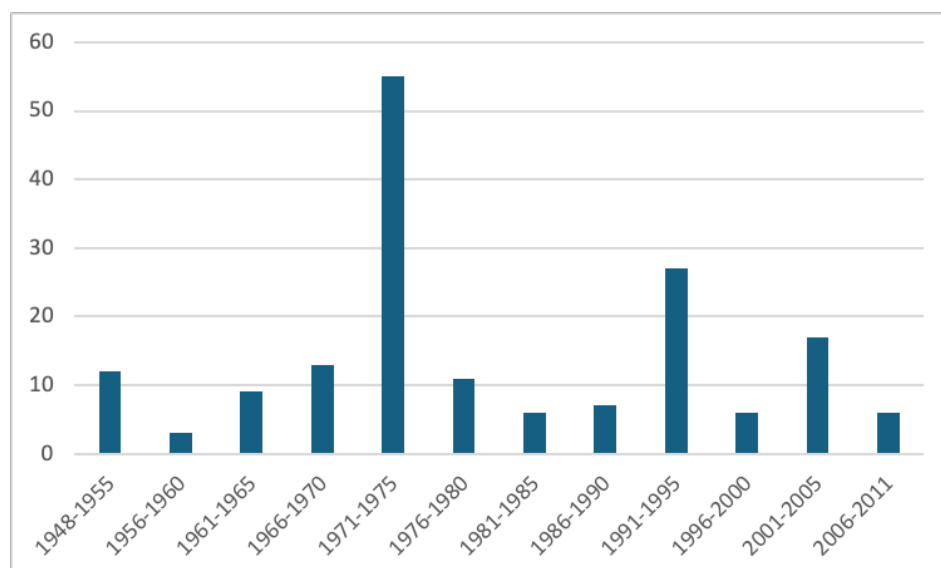
Soon Sung Cho, "Japan's Two Koreas Policy and the Problems of Korean Unification," *Asian Survey* 7, no. 10 (1967): 715; Seung K. Ko, "North Korea's Relations with Japan since Détente," *Pacific Affairs* 50, no. 1 (1977): 37.

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Denny Roy, "North Korea's Relations with Japan: The Legacy of War," *Asian Survey* 28, no. 12 (1988): 1286-89.

imperialism as well as its material support for independence movements.⁸ But North Korea also reached out to Western countries, promising access to North Korea's plentiful natural resources and untapped domestic market. In the early 1970s, North Korea set up trade missions in many capitals around Western Europe and signed numerous trade contracts through the efforts of these missions. The trade missions also worked hard and successfully to establish personal connections to the business communities in these countries. It is believed that North Korea's trade with capitalist countries increased by a factor of 10 through the 1970s, accounting for nearly half of North Korea's foreign trade by the end of the decade.⁹ These relentless efforts in the formerly colonial world and the capitalist core led to an explosive growth of North Korea's diplomatic relations in the first half of the 1970s. While the number of countries recognizing South Korea was more than double that of North Korea in 1971, by the end of 1976 there was an "approximate parity" between the two Koreas in terms of diplomatic recognitions (96 versus 91 in favor of Seoul).¹⁰

[Figure 1] North Korea's establishment of diplomatic relations, 1948-2011 (number of countries)



As shown in the graph above,¹¹ North Korea established diplomatic relations with 55 countries in the period between the start of 1971 and the end of 1975. That is by far the highest number of newly established diplomatic relations over a five-year period in North Korea's history. The North Korean efforts mentioned above were also targeting Japan.¹² In fact, Japan was seen as one of the most important targets of North Korea's diplomatic charm offensive due to the compatibility of the two countries' economies.¹³ North Korea was rich in raw materials and poor in advanced industrial technology, while Japan was in the opposite situation.¹⁴ North Korea also saw diplomatic relations with Japan as particularly attractive due to the major legitimacy boost such relations would provide in the intense legitimacy contest with South Korea.¹⁵

The image of North Korea among the Japanese probably improved when Pyongyang established diplomatic relations with the Nordic states in 1973. These were countries with excellent relations with Japan and long traditions of democracy and market economy – values that Japan shared. These friendly countries'

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We were only able to obtain data from April to December in 1973. Jiji Tsūshinsha, "Jiji seron chōsa [Jiji Public Opinion Survey]," *Seron chōsa nenkan (Naikaku-fu)*, 1973.

17

South Korea's average dislike rate in the same months was 13.4 percent.

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Hahn Bae-ho, "Korea-Japan Relations in the 1970s," *Asian Survey* 20, no. 11 (1980): 1092-94, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2643911>.

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Hong N. Kim, "Japanese-South Korean relations in the post-Vietnam era," *Asian Survey* 16, no. 10 (1976): 981-95.

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Ria Chae, "Close Encounters of the Nonnuclear Kind: The North Korean Public Relations Campaign in U.S. Media of the 1970s," *International Journal of Communication* 14 (2020): 1358-60.

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For a detailed analysis of how this process played out among Swedish journalists, see Åke J. Ek, Hans C. Pettersson and Erik Linander, *Kostbart diplomatisk (ut-)spel? [Costly Diplomatic Gambit?]* (Studentlitteratur, 1980), 87-97.

22

An, *North Korea in Transition*, 115.

23

All quotes from Jean Lacouture come from Jan Rakūchūru, "Kitachōsen no tabi (shita): Kyūsoku na kokuryoku no hatten [A Trip to North Korea (Second Segment): Rapid Development of National Strength]," *Asahi Shimbun*, August 19, 1971, 6.

recognition of North Korea likely played a part in normalizing North Korea in the eyes of many Japanese whose primary impression of the country had been that of an aggressor state in the Korean War. This shift in perception gave North Korea a legitimacy boost in Japan.

4. A Relatively Positive Impression of North Korea in Japan

North Korea's charm offensive was successful in creating a relatively positive impression of North Korea in Japan. Although it would be an overstatement to call North Korea popular during this time, it at least managed to clean up its negative image as an aggressor in the Korean War. This can be gleaned from the monthly survey *Jiji Seron Chōsa*, which shows that *only* 16.8 percent of Japanese people "disliked" North Korea in 1973.¹⁶ This is by far North Korea's lowest dislike rate in the poll's history (although data for North Korea is lacking in the early Cold War period). In fact, in this period, there is not much that separates the (un)popularity of North Korea from that of South Korea.¹⁷ While the impression of North Korea was improving, South Korea's image was worsening due to its implementation of martial law in 1972 and its abduction of the prominent opposition politician Kim Dae-jung on Japanese territory in 1973.¹⁸ The latter incident had a particularly damaging effect on Japan-South Korea relations, as it was seen in Japan as a violation of state sovereignty.¹⁹ These worsening perceptions of South Korea undoubtedly made it easier for North Korea to improve its standing in Japan.

The early 1970s were a period when Pyongyang began inviting Western journalists to North Korea for carefully choreographed tours that highlighted the country's social and industrial progress.²⁰ This led to a number of articles in some of the West's leading newspapers that depicted North Korea in unusually flattering terms. Some of these depictions were likely a result of real progress in North Korea, but some of the praise was almost unquestionably a result of uncritical reporting from these state-controlled visits.²¹

Japan was no exception to this curious journalistic trend of the 1970s.²² For example, on August 18 and 19 in 1971, the liberal *Asahi Shimbun* ran two lengthy segments about North Korea written by the French journalist Jean Lacouture who had spent a week in North Korea where he even got to meet Kim Il-sung. From Lacouture's reporting, *Asahi's* readers learned that North Korea "is currently undergoing astonishing development."²³ In fact, under Kim Il-sung's leadership, it had reportedly developed into a country "that probably surpasses any other country in the socialist Third World." But for Japan's business community, it was probably Lacouture's statistics (of unknown origin) that drew the most interest. "North Korea," Lacouture wrote, "has more factories per person than Italy, its illiteracy rate is lower than France's, it has more technical research institutes than Spain, and more gas stations than Yugoslavia." Such depictions of a rapidly industrializing country with a cheap and well-educated labor force naturally sounded attractive to profit-hungry businessmen in Japan. This type of reporting was not just limited to left-leaning outlets like the *Asahi Shimbun*. The conservative *Yomiuri Shimbun* also sent journalists to North Korea to report on the country's progress. In 1971, it printed a three-part serial called "North Korea: Construction and people," focusing on North Korea's impressive rebuilding efforts and the improvements in its people's living standards. Readers of the usually anti-socialist *Yomiuri* could read about the wonders of North Korean socialism:

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Yomiuri Shimbun, "Kitachōsen 'Kensetsu to ningen to' (ue) [North Korea: 'Construction and People' (First Segment)]," November 19, 1971, 3.

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Kim Il Sung, *Answers to the Questions Raised by Foreign Journalists* (Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1974), 241.

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Ibid., 239.

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Tani Kei, "Nicchō bōeki ni kan suru nihon seifu no seisaku kettei: 1960 nendai zenhan ni okeru chokusetu yusō to chokusetsu kessai no jitsugen o chūshin ni [The Japanese Government's Policy Decisions on Japan-North Korean Trade: Focusing on the Realization of Direct Transportation and Direct Payment in the First Half of the 1960s]," *Ajia Keizai* 62, no. 3 (2021): 2.

28

The officially used word "repatriate" is somewhat misleading since more than 90 percent of the Zainichi population originated from the south of the Korean Peninsula.

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Kiwon Chung, "Japanese-North Korean Relations Today," *Asian Survey* 4, no. 4 (1964): 795-803.

Narrowing the gap between heavy and light labor, between agricultural and industrial work through technological innovation, freeing women from heavy burdens in the home, and enabling their participation in society – these tasks signify that the Republic's domestic development has entered a new stage. Through this six-year plan, the Republic is determined to demonstrate the true value of building socialism and to advance toward becoming a more-developed socialist industrial nation. [...] Having pursued self-reliance at *Chollima* speed, the Republic is now, with confidence, about to embark on a "challenge toward prosperity."²⁴

It was probably due to this kind of flowery reporting that Kim Il-sung on one occasion expressed gratitude to "the progressive men of the Japanese press who have shown much sympathy for our country in their writing."²⁵ The positive depictions in Japanese press coverage of North Korea's development, often ignoring the darker sides of North Korean society, played a role in improving North Korea's standing in the eyes of many Japanese. This in turn facilitated the emergence of a quite powerful pro-Pyongyang lobby in Japan.

5. The Emergence of a Pro-Pyongyang Lobby in Japan

In May 1972, Kim Il-sung spoke with a delegation of Japanese Socialist Party mayors and noted with satisfaction that "In Japan today progressive democrats friendly towards the Korean people and the people sympathizing with and supporting us are constantly increasing."²⁶ It was indeed true that many Japanese groups and organizations explicitly calling for diplomatic recognition of North Korea emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Although there were differences between them, for the sake of convenience, we will henceforth refer to these groups collectively as the pro-Pyongyang lobby. Generally speaking, this lobby was comprised of leftists who sought closer relations with North Korea mostly for ideological reasons and segments of the business community that sought closer relations with North Korea to make profits from the country's growth and industrialization.²⁷

The Japanese pro-Pyongyang lobby included actors such as the Parliamentarian League for Promotion of Friendship between Japan and North Korea [*nicchō yūkō sokushin giin renmei*] (founded in 1971), The Japan-North Korea Association [*nicchō kyōkai*] (1955), and the Japan-North Korea Trade Association [*nicchō bōekikai*] (1956). The two latter organizations had been around since the 1950s, but they increased their activism in concert with North Korea's charm offensive in Japan. These organizations' activities were often coordinated by *Chongryon*, which was a politically influential interest organization for the many Korean residents in Japan, known as *Zainichi* Koreans, who identified with North Korea rather than South Korea. *Chongryon* had been established in 1955 and ran a comprehensive network of schools teaching North Korean curricula as well as spreading North Korean narratives in Japan. In the absence of diplomatic relations, *Chongryon* functioned as the de facto North Korean embassy in Japan. During the Cold War, *Chongryon*'s mobilization skills were formidable. It was, for example, largely due to *Chongryon*'s activism that the Japanese government in 1959 granted *Zainichi* Koreans the opportunity to "repatriate"²⁸ to North Korea despite fierce protests from South Korea.²⁹ By the mid-1960s, the repatriation project had sent more than 80,000 *Zainichi* Koreans on a one-way trip to North Korea in what was history's greatest exodus from a capitalist country to a communist country and thus a massive

[30](#)[Cho, "Japan's Two Koreas Policy," 710.](#)[31](#)[Yomiuri Shimbun, "'Nicchō giren' sutāto: Sōki jōseika ni 246 nin ni kessoku \[Launch of the 'Japan-North Korea Parliamentarians' League': 246 Members United on Early Normalization\], November 17, 1971, 2.](#)[32](#)[Shin, "Japanese-North Korean Relations," 77.](#)[33](#)[Ko, "North Korea's Relations with Japan," 35.](#)[34](#)[An, *North Korea in Transition*, 91.](#)[35](#)[Tani, "Nicchō bōeki," 5.](#)[36](#)[Cho, "Japan's Two Koreas Policy," 712.](#)[37](#)[Ibid., 713.](#)[38](#)[Tani, "Nicchō bōeki," 13.](#)

propaganda victory for North Korea.³⁰ In the early 1970s, *Chongryon* ratcheted up its mobilization efforts, sensing a chance of increased trade and diplomatic relations. It helped coordinate the activism of the pro-Pyongyang lobby to maximize the pressure on the Japanese government.

The establishment of the Parliamentary League for Promotion of Friendship between Japan and North Korea in 1971 was a massive win for *Chongryon* and North Korea. This organization, which had "promoting friendship and establishing diplomatic relations" with North Korea as one of its official goals,³¹ was surprisingly multipartisan. Although most of its members belonged to left-wing parties such as the Japan Socialist Party and the Japan Communist Party, it was led by Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) member Kuno Chūji while Nozue Kazuhiko from the centrist Dainiin Club served as the Secretary-General. Remarkably, one third of all Diet members in both chambers (246 of 751) had joined the League by the time of its inauguration.³² This is perhaps the clearest indication of how much support diplomatic normalization had at the time. The influence of the pro-Pyongyang lobby was such that in the 1972 election campaign, Japan's four largest opposition parties all adopted diplomatic relations with North Korea as a part of their political platform.³³ Such strong sentiments on the grassroots level, in corporate circles, and among the opposition parties undoubtedly put pressure on the LDP government to recognize North Korea.

6. Increased Trade with North Korea

Before the 1970s, Japan's trade with North Korea had been negligible. The UN issued a trade embargo against North Korea in response to the country's invasion of South Korea in 1950. This embargo was lifted in 1957.³⁴ Although Japan did not become a UN member until late 1956, as an aspiring member, Japan was expected to follow UN resolutions. In 1955, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) formally banned trade with North Korea (making some exceptions for indirect trade through third-party channels).³⁵ The ban was lifted in 1961, but certain trade restrictions remained. Exports of certain strategic goods were, for example, banned or subject to prior approval.³⁶ The legalization of trade with North Korea led to a rapid increase in bilateral trade, albeit from a very low starting point. Japan-North Korea trade levels increased from USD 1 million in 1960 to USD 31 million in 1965 (for comparison, bilateral trade with South Korea rose from USD 118 million to USD 221 million in the same period).³⁷ However, the Japan-North Korea trade suffered badly from Japan's normalization of diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1965, which elevated Tokyo and Seoul's trade relations to new heights at the expense of Tokyo's trade with Pyongyang.

Although Japan's trade volume with North Korea was always massively inferior to that with South Korea, the North Korea trade was still seen as important for the development of Japan's heavy industry. North Korean minerals and metals, such as anthracite and iron ore, were not only necessary for Japan's industrialization, they were also cheap due to the short transportation route. Thanks to the quality of its exports, North Korea thus carried greater trade importance than its low trading volume would indicate.³⁸ Interest in North Korea therefore never completely faded away among Japanese industrialists despite the increased importance of South Korea after 1965.

North Korea's impressive growth in the 1960s furthermore ensured that the

³⁹Kim, *Answers to the Questions*, 147.⁴⁰

Central Intelligence Agency (CIA),
*Memorandum: North Korean Policy Toward
 the Non-Communist World: Objectives,
 Results, and Prospects* (December 16,
 1971): 14–15. Obtained through the CIA
 Reading Room online archive, [https://
 www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-
 RDP85T00875R002000110036-4.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP85T00875R002000110036-4.pdf).

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Ko, “South Korean-Japanese Relations,” 38.

⁴²

Shin, “Japanese-North Korean Relations,” 89.

Japanese business community kept a curious eye on the northern half of the Korean Peninsula. Business interest was unquestionably further whetted in the early 1970s when Japanese journalists, as mentioned earlier, began visiting North Korea and writing glowing reports about the unknown economic miracle north of the 38th parallel. But what attracted Japanese industrialists the most was North Korea’s launch of a new six-year economic plan in 1971. This plan, the North Koreans claimed, was going to usher in a “technical revolution” and massively expand the country’s industrialization drive. In a 1971 interview with Japanese journalists, Kim Il-sung explained that “We found the master key to the technical revolution in the production of machine tools. If we are to carry out this revolution, we need a lot of machine tools.”³⁹ This was certainly something Japanese industrialists could provide.

A later-declassified 1971 report by the CIA, which was keenly observing developments between Japan and North Korea, succinctly explains the win-win nature of Japan-North Korea trade:

In economic terms, Pyongyang wants favorable Japanese consideration of North Korea’s industrial requirements for its current Six-Year Plan. Japan is obviously in the best position to supply such help; shipping costs are low compared to Western European sources, and Japan is familiar with North Korea’s economic structure, needs, and practices. [...] Although North Korea is hardly a market with major potential, Japanese traders would like to capitalize on Pyongyang’s desire to import entire manufacturing plants. There is also interest in relatively cheap supplies of North Korea’s ferrous and non-ferrous ores.⁴⁰

Given this compatibility between the two countries’ needs, it is no wonder that interest in bilateral trade rose with the advent of North Korea’s new six-year plan.

[Table 1] Japan-North Korea Trade Volume, 1969-1975 (USD)⁴¹

Year	Japanese exports	Japanese imports	Total volume
1969	24,159,000	32,186,000	56,345,000
1970	23,344,000	34,414,000	57,748,000
1971	28,907,000	30,059,000	58,966,000
1972	93,443,000	38,311,000	131,754,000
1973	100,159,000	72,317,000	172,476,000
1974	251,914,000	108,824,000	360,738,000
1975	180,175,000	65,146,000	245,321,000

In 1972, a five-year trade agreement was signed between the Parliamentary League for Promotion of Friendship between Japan-North Korea and the North Korean Committee for Promotion of International Trade. The agreement aimed to increase the bilateral trade volume from approximately USD 130 million in 1972 to USD 500 million by 1976, allowed for business-related entry of North Koreans into Japan, and made available deferred payment conditions to North Korea as well as funds through Japan’s Import-Export Bank. Although the trade agreement was not an official government-to-government agreement, it did contain “semi-official element[s]” since it was signed by Kuno Chūji, a senior LDP politician, and required a substantial degree of government involvement due to its inclusion of Import-Export Bank funds.⁴² The trade agreement did raise the bilateral trade volume, but

⁴³An, *North Korea in Transition*, 82-86.⁴⁴

Shin, "Japanese-North Korean Relations," 89.

⁴⁵

For a detailed explanation of the historical development of the Hallstein Doctrine, see Domin Kim, "1961~1973 nyŏn pak chŏng-hŭi chŏngbu ŭi taejungripkuk oegyo wa halshut'ain wŏnch'ik [Park Chung-hee's Diplomatic Policy toward Neutral Countries and the Hallstein Principle between 1961 and 1973]," *Yŏksa Munje Yŏn'gu* 27, no. 3 (2023): 325-58.

its goal of USD 500 million was not met since the North Korean economy began to encounter serious problems in the mid-1970s. Pyongyang entered a balance-of-payment crisis, unable to pay its mounting debts, and therefore increasingly began to look like an unreliable business partner.⁴³ This significantly diminished the interest of Japan's capitalists in North Korea as an investment opportunity.

7. *South Korea Ends Its Hallstein Doctrine*

Until the 1970s, South Korea firmly stuck to a principle of not establishing diplomatic relations with countries that recognized North Korea and severing diplomatic relations with countries that recognized North Korea after first having recognized the South. This refusal of dual recognition mirrored West Germany's Hallstein Doctrine vis-à-vis East Germany and was therefore known as the Korean Hallstein Doctrine. South Korea, for example, severed its diplomatic relations with Mauritania in 1964 and the Republic of Congo in 1965 after these states recognized North Korea. Since Tokyo recognized Seoul in 1965, it would presumably have been impossible for Japan in this period to recognize North Korea without giving up the more important diplomatic relations with South Korea.

But as decolonization led to a rapid increase in new countries that recognized North Korea, the Korean Hallstein Doctrine was becoming a liability for South Korea, which increasingly feared that its rigid policy risked helping North Korea win the diplomatic recognition race. To avoid this, South Korea began to make some exceptions to the doctrine in the late 1960s. In 1969 South Korea chose to maintain relations with Chad despite the latter's recognition of North Korea.⁴⁴ Since then, South Korea thus began to practise its Hallstein Doctrine on a discretionary basis until 1973 when it finally decided to scrap it, signalling a significant change in Seoul's foreign policy stance.⁴⁵ This policy shift would, at least in theory, make it possible for Tokyo to cross-recognize Seoul and Pyongyang if it so desired. This constitutes the last enabling factor that made diplomatic relations between Japan and North Korea a realistic possibility in the early 1970s.

Why Did Japan Abstain from Diplomatic Relations with North Korea?

As shown above, the early 1970s saw the alignment of multiple enabling factors that all made diplomatic relations between Japan and North Korea more likely. Why, then, did Japan nevertheless abstain from such relations? This question will be answered in the following by highlighting three countervailing factors that disincentivized diplomatic relations.

1. *Concern about Retaliation by South Korea*

It is important to stress that in the 1970s it was not clear which of the two Koreas would emerge as the dominant and legitimate one. Compared to today, North Korea was far more, and South Korea far less, competitive in the competition for legitimacy. There was an intense legitimacy struggle between North and South Korea that could have tipped both ways and even appeared to be tipping in North Korea's favor by the mid-1960s and early 1970s. This was especially the case within the UN General Assembly where pro-North Korea resolutions were beginning to gain support due to the rapid increase of post-colonial states with friendly

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Choi, "The Korean Question in the United Nations," 398-99.

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Lee, "The Direction of South Korea's Foreign Policy," 115.

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Chung, "Japanese-North Korean Relations Today," 800.

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Ko, "South Korean-Japanese Relations," 57-58.

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Ibid., 58.

ties to North Korea.⁴⁶ This changing balance of diplomatic power is crucial to understanding why Seoul resisted a Japan-North Korea rapprochement so fiercely. Both Koreas regarded Japanese support as vital for their political causes and for swaying global public opinion. The Japanese 1959 decision to repatriate *Zainichi* Koreans to North Korea had been a massive propaganda win for North Korea, but Japan's recognition of South Korea in 1965 was an even bigger victory for Seoul. Pyongyang was hoping to achieve the same while Seoul was trying, at all costs, to prevent a Japanese recognition of North Korea.⁴⁷

South Korea did indeed abandon its Hallstein Doctrine in the early 1970s, but that does not mean that Japan was free to diplomatically recognize North Korea without facing serious reprisals by South Korea, potentially including a severance of diplomatic relations. South Korea could stomach diplomatic relations between North Korea and most other countries, but not Japan. Japan was far more important for South Korea than any third-world country and even any Western European country. Japan was by far the most economically dominant actor in the region and a Japanese recognition of North Korea would constitute a significant boost to Pyongyang's legitimacy. This was an outcome South Korea was willing to go to extreme lengths to prevent. The end of the Hallstein Doctrine did therefore not give Japan a free pass to recognize North Korea. This was well understood in Tokyo, which had ample experience with the aggressiveness with which South Korea had responded to any Japanese overture toward North Korea in the past. The following will provide a non-exhaustive summary of these experiences.

When Japan accepted North Korea's request for repatriations of *Zainichi* Koreans in 1959, South Korea responded by cutting off all trade with Japan and even threatening to sink ships carrying repatriates (a threat it did not carry out).⁴⁸ Due to the asymmetrical power relations between Japan and South Korea, the latter ended its trade embargo of Japanese goods, on which it relied heavily, in less than a year, but the episode showed that South Korea was willing to create a nuisance for Japan if Tokyo leaned too much toward Pyongyang. This pattern was repeated in 1966 when Japan considered making an exception to its ban on travel entry for North Koreans. Japan contemplated allowing three North Korean technicians entry to inspect machines that two Japanese companies planned to export to North Korea. South Korea's response to this incident was particularly furious. The South Korean government banned its citizens from doing business with Japanese counterparts and even from traveling to Japan. It also considered launching a nationwide Japan boycott and recalling its diplomats from Japan.⁴⁹ In the South Korean parliament the reactions were even more severe as opposition parties were calling for the annulment of the 1965 normalization treaty and the severing of diplomatic relations.⁵⁰ Shocked by these developments, the Japanese government decided to deny entry to the North Korean technicians while the Japanese exporting companies cancelled their deal with North Korea to avoid further backlash from South Korea. Another example of a fierce South Korean response came in the wake of Japan's semi-official trade agreement with North Korea in 1972. Given the ambitious trade volume goals in this agreement, South Korea feared that it would boost North Korea's economy and, by extension, its military power. It was well understood in Tokyo that the trade agreement – North Korea's first with a non-socialist country – would spur strong reactions in Seoul. Shibuya Kunihiro, a Kōmeitō lawmaker, raised the issue in the Japanese Diet and warned of a coming "severance of diplomatic relations" if the agreement was carried out.⁵¹ His warning was not unfounded. The Japanese-North

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Japanese Diet, 68th session, Upper House Foreign Affairs Committee, no. 4, statement by Shibuya Kunihiro, statement no. 123, *Kokkai Kaigiroku Kensaku Shisutemu*, (March 16, 1972).

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Kyunghyang Shinmun, "Tu kae-ŭi han'gungnon yudo: Il ijungsŏng-e chibchung't'a [Efforts to Induce a "Two Koreas" Theory': Direct Blow to Japan's Dual Attitude]," January 27, 1972. <https://newslibrary.naver.com/viewer/index.naver?articleId=1972012700329204001&editNo=2&printCount=1&publishDate=1972-01-27&officelId=00032&pageNo=4&printNo=8099&publishType=00020>.

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Kim, "Japanese-South Korean Relations," 986.

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The Department of State, Memorandum of Conversation, Seoul, November 22, 1974, 3 p.m., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume XII* (November 22, 1974). Obtained from the Office of the Historian online archive, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve12/d258>.

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Kim, "Japanese-South Korean Relations," 995.

56

Japanese Diet, 68th session, Upper House Foreign Affairs Committee, no. 4, statement by Fukuda Takeo, statement no. 124, *Kokkai Kaigiroku Kensaku Shisutemu* (March 16, 1972).

Korean trade agreement led to a serious political crisis in South Korea. Emergency meetings were convened in the Blue House and in the Korean parliament. In the latter meetings, a series of hardline countermeasures were proposed, including "cutting diplomatic ties with Japan."⁵² While diplomatic relations were not cut, they remained strained until 1975.⁵³

South Korea's responses to Japanese overtures toward North Korea were not only limited to direct threats and punitive measures, they also included appeals to the US to pressure Japan.

In response to Japan's decision to let its Export-Import Bank (JEXIM) issue a new loan to North Korean importers in 1974, South Korean President Park Chung-hee complained directly to US President Gerald Ford and asked him to dissuade the Japanese: "The left-wing press and political circles are pressuring the Japanese Government, and the Japanese Government is making hasty approaches to North Korea. I hope the U.S. will use its influence to discourage these approaches."⁵⁴ Whether due to US pressure or other reasons, the Japanese government quickly discontinued JEXIM lending to North Korea.⁵⁵

As is clear from the above, South Korea resolutely opposed every move by Japan aimed at improving relations with North Korea. These reprisals included formal complaints, trade sanctions, calls for US pressure, and even threats of severance of diplomatic relations. The official discontinuation of the Hallstein Doctrine in the early 1970s did not end this relentless pressure from South Korea. Having experienced this pressure countless times, Japanese government officials were well aware of South Korean sensitivities. For example, in response to Shibuya's warning in the Diet about South Korean reprisals, Foreign Minister Fukuda Takeo stated that:

South Korea is extremely sensitive when it comes to Japan's contacts with North Korea. They are watching each of Japan's actions very closely. [...] We are fully aware of South Korea's situation, and we believe that unnecessarily provoking South Korea would not be appropriate, particularly from the standpoint of maintaining stability on the Korean Peninsula as a whole.⁵⁶

An actual diplomatic recognition of North Korea would have thrown Japan's more important diplomatic relations with South Korea into serious jeopardy, and this was well understood in Tokyo. A recognition of North Korea was therefore simply not worth the risk.

2. Diplomatic Relations with Pyongyang Had Few Benefits for Tokyo

Diplomatic relations with Pyongyang could have jeopardized Tokyo's diplomatic relations with Seoul, but it is also unlikely that a recognition of North Korea would have brought any additional benefits to Japan that it did not already enjoy under the existing non-normalized framework. One benefit that normalization supporters often touted was increased trade. It is true that the North Korea trade held some significance for Japan due to the rich reserves of important natural resources in North Korea (e.g. iron ore, coal, silver, zinc and lead). In terms of trade, North Korea therefore punched above its weight. Its trade volume with Japan was far smaller than South Korea's, but the nature of its exports was more valuable and harder to replace than the goods, mainly foodstuffs, coming from South Korea. As one observer noted in the late 1960s, unlike North Korea, "South Korea does not

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Cho, "Japan's Two Koreas Policy," 715.

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Ko, "North Korea's Relations with Japan," 40.

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Roy, "North Korea's Relations with Japan," 1288.

supply any vital materials which the Japanese need badly for their industry.”⁵⁷ While it is true that North Korean exports might have had a degree of strategic importance for Japan, it is not obvious that diplomatic relations would have changed Japan's access to these products in any significant way. This is because Japan could access North Korean minerals and metals even without diplomatic relations. Japan-North Korea relations were highly asymmetric as Japan, which had become an economic superpower, could relatively easily forego trade with North Korea while North Korea was extremely dependent on its Japan-trade. In 1974 when bilateral trade had increased significantly due to the 1972 Japan-North Korean trade agreement, Japan's exports to North Korea were still only 0.45 percent of its total exports, and its imports from North Korea were only 0.18 percent of its total imports.⁵⁸ At the same time, however, Japan had become North Korea's second-biggest trading partner, only behind the Soviet Union. This fundamental trade asymmetry allowed Japan to set the premises for the trade relations and gave Japan virtually free access to North Korea's strategic goods without diplomatic relations. Denny Roy therefore correctly points out the pragmatic wisdom of Tokyo's decision to forego diplomatic relations with North Korea during the Cold War:

[...] [R]ecognizing North Korea would bring down upon Tokyo the anger of the United States and South Korea. This is far too high a price to pay to please Pyongyang, especially when the North Koreans are willing to carry on trade and other exchanges with Japan even in the absence of normalized relations.⁵⁹

3. *Fear of Helping Pyongyang Gain Dominance on the Korean Peninsula*

Although Japan officially adhered to a “Two Koreas” policy that *de facto* recognized the existence of two Korean governments on the Korean Peninsula, Tokyo clearly had an ideological, economic and strategic preference for Seoul over Pyongyang, as indicated by its *de jure* 1965 recognition of only the South Korean government. In fact, the Japanese government was wary of undertaking actions that could significantly tip the balance of power on the Korean Peninsula in favor of Pyongyang. Declassified documents from Japan's MOFA show that the Japanese government was deeply concerned about North Korea's aggressive intentions toward South Korea and did not believe that reconciliatory language from Pyongyang signaled an abandonment of aggressive intent. A 1975 internal memo from MOFA's Northeast Asia Bureau described Kim Il-sung's strategy in the following terms:

Since the establishment of the North and South regimes on the Korean Peninsula following Japan's defeat in the War, Kim Il-sung has consistently maintained as his fundamental policy the unification of the peninsula on his own terms (namely, a “red unification”). Although there have been changes at times in tactics depending on domestic and international developments, it appears that this fundamental policy has remained unchanged. [...] While outwardly promoting the banner of peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula, Kim Il-sung is likely to use all available means to support anti-Park [Chung-hee] forces inside and outside South Korea, aiming to destabilize the country, and to intensify efforts to portray the Park regime as undemocratic both domestically and internationally.⁶⁰

It is clear that the Japanese government, at least its diplomats, had no illusions about North Korea's peace offensive in the détente years. If South Korea lost

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Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Kitachōsen no taigai seisaku kankei [Materials Related to North Korea's External Relations]," category no: A:2.1.0.K(N)1 (June 1975): 141-42.

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Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Kitachōsen no taigai seisaku kankei," 144.

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Ulv Hanssen, *Temporal Identities and Security Policy in Postwar Japan* (New York: Routledge, 2020), chapter 3.

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Tsukasa Matsueda and George E. Moore, "Japan's shifting attitudes toward the military: Mitsuya Kenkyu and the Self-Defense Forces," *Asian Survey* 7, no. 9 (1967): 614-25.

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The American Presidency Project, "Joint Statement Following Discussions with Prime Minister Sato of Japan" (November 21, 1969). <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/joint-statement-following-discussions-with-prime-minister-sato-japan>.

international support and especially if US forces were withdrawn from South Korea, the Japanese foreign service feared that North Korea would try to foment "revolutionary forces in South Korea," "provoke turmoil, and attempt to induce the collapse of the government from within."⁶¹

A communist takeover on the Korean Peninsula was seen as a severe threat to Japan's own security. Historically, Japan has been almost obsessed with Korea's geostrategic location and how it could be used as a launchpad for an invasion of Japan. During the Meiji period (1868-1912), Korea was famously referred to as a "dagger pointing to the heart of Japan," and control over Korea was at the core of Meiji Japan's wars against China (1895) and Russia (1905), and finally its annexation of the Korean Peninsula (1910). Although open discussions about external threats became something of a taboo in postwar Japan,⁶² the fear of the "Korean dagger" never disappeared. Japanese military planners might not have spoken loudly about the North Korean threat, but they did plan for North Korea-related contingencies. In 1965, a scandal broke out when it was revealed that the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF) had secretly made a contingency plan for how to respond to a new Korean War. What made this plan, which was known as the "Three Arrows Study," so controversial was the fact that it was made without civilian oversight (even the prime minister was unaware of it) and that it seemed to envision the implementation of a state of emergency and a military government in Japan in the event of a North Korean attack on South Korea.⁶³ The SDF and the Defense Agency thus considered a North Korean takeover of the South as a grave threat to Japan's own security.

This threat perception was, perhaps naturally, strongest in Japan's military circles, but it was also present on the political level, particularly inside the LDP. This threat perception found a clear expression in a 1969 joint communique between Prime Minister Satō Eisaku and US President Richard Nixon in which the former stated that "the security of the Republic of Korea was essential to Japan's own security."⁶⁴ This statement, often called "the Korea clause," marked the first time a Japanese prime minister acknowledged that South Korea's security was directly linked to that of Japan, and that Japan therefore could not be indifferent to developments on the Korean Peninsula.

The fear that a communist takeover in Korea could have direct security implications for Japan – in effect, a new "Korean dagger" argument – ensured that Japan could not stay neutral in the inter-Korean struggle for dominance on the peninsula. Even though Japan officially operated with a "two Koreas" policy, Soon Sung Cho was probably right to point out that this was always, in reality, just a "one and one-half Korea" policy.⁶⁵ To prevent North Korean dominance on the Korean Peninsula, it was necessary for Japan to support South Korea and avoid actions that could boost North Korea's military power and legitimacy. This was arguably the biggest reason why Japan refrained from recognizing North Korea.

The three above-mentioned countervailing factors ensured that Tokyo kept trade relations with Pyongyang at a low level and eschewed diplomatic relations.

Conclusion

This article has analyzed Japan-North Korea relations during the first half of the 1970s, an understudied period that saw many significant structural changes that could have led to diplomatic relations between the two countries. We identified

seven changes that together created a possibility for diplomatic relations: 1) the Cold War entered a period of détente and reconciliation, 2) the Watergate scandal paralyzed the Nixon administration in the US and made it difficult for the US to apply pressure on countries that made overtures to Pyongyang, 3) North Korea initiated a charm offensive aimed at capitalist countries, 4) North Korea enjoyed a relatively positive reputation in Japan thanks to its impressive economic progress and media coverage that tended to exaggerate it, 5) a pro-Pyongyang lobby made up of left-wing activists as well as profit-hungry businesspeople emerged in Japan and pushed energetically for diplomatic relations with Pyongyang, 6) Japan's trade with North Korea increased rapidly in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and 7) South Korea abandoned its Hallstein Doctrine. The alignment of these factors created an opportunity for Japanese diplomatic relations with North Korea that had not existed previously. But the window of opportunity was narrow and by the end of the 1970s all abovementioned factors (perhaps except for number seven) had disappeared or been weakened. North Korea's massive debt problems in the mid-1970s revealed to the world that North Korea's economy was far less miraculous than commonly believed. This lowered the attraction of investments in North Korea and consequently also reduced support for diplomatic relations in the eyes of the business community. Furthermore, the de-radicalization of the Japanese left due to the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 also weakened the grassroots push for relations with North Korea. As pressure on the government from the business community and the left relented, the opportunity for diplomatic relations with North Korea significantly diminished. However, from approximately 1970 to 1975, there was a real opportunity for diplomatic relations.

That the Japanese government nonetheless chose not to act on this opportunity, we believe, can be attributed to three countervailing factors. Firstly, Japan was concerned about retaliation from South Korea. Japanese decisionmakers were keenly aware of the fact that South Korea had responded aggressively to every Japanese attempt at closer relations with North Korea in the past and would undoubtedly do so in the future as well. The possibility of severed diplomatic relations or severely reduced trade relations with South Korea was well understood. Diplomatic relations with North Korea were therefore a gamble with high risks and low rewards. Secondly, Japan was able to trade with North Korea and secure North Korean critical resources even without diplomatic relations. As North Korea became increasingly dependent on its trade with Japan, it had little choice but to grant Japan access to its crucial minerals and metals. Under such asymmetric conditions, Japan was able to enjoy the benefits of trade with North Korea without having to "reward" Pyongyang with diplomatic relations. Combined with the near certainty of South Korean retaliation for a recognition of North Korea, the strong North Korean dependence on trade with Japan created a situation that gave Tokyo very few incentives to recognize Pyongyang and many incentives to refrain from doing so. Thirdly, Japan did not want to undertake any action that could tip the balance of power between the two Koreas in favor of North Korea. Japan was ideologically opposed to communism and concerned about how a communist takeover of the Korean Peninsula would affect its own security. These security concerns were a continuation of old fears of a "Korean dagger" pointed at the heart of Japan. A communist victory in Korea could have given the Soviet Union a strategically important point of departure for an invasion of Japan were the Cold War to turn hot. The fear of disrupting the fragile balance of power on the Korean Peninsula

functioned as a strong incentive to refrain from diplomatic relations with Pyongyang and keep trade relations at a low level. Together, these three countervailing factors, we argue, ensured that Japan did not act on the opportunity for diplomatic relations that the early 1970s provided.

What does this curious piece of history tell us about the prospects of diplomatic relations between Japan and North Korea today? There are some possible lessons one could draw from this history. There are two mutually exclusive ways to read this history and connect it to today's bilateral relationship. The first reading is deeply pessimistic while the second is more optimistic. The pessimistic reading is as follows: If Japan and North Korea were unable to establish diplomatic relations in a period when all the conditions for diplomatic recognition were favorable, the prospect of diplomatic relations today – when almost all conditions are decidedly unfavorable – is virtually non-existent. Today, bilateral relations are marred by a set of problems that did not exist in the 1970s, such as the abduction issue and North Korea's development of nuclear weapons and missiles. Hence, if diplomatic relations eluded the two countries in the most favorable of times, how can there be any realistic chance of such relations now in the most unfavorable of times? This pessimistic reading implies that contemporary analysts of Japan-North Korea relations might, if anything, underestimate the difficulty of rapprochement and diplomatic relations between the two countries.

But it is also possible to read this history in a more optimistic way. The optimistic reading, which we subscribe to, goes like this: The early 1970s, despite the many structural changes, were actually not the most favorable time for diplomatic relations between the two countries. On the contrary, conditions are arguably more favorable today, or could at least become more favorable in the foreseeable future as the salience of the abduction issue inevitably wanes. Yes, it is true that today's bilateral relations suffer from several new and complex problems that were absent in the past, and it is true that most of the favorable conditions of the early 1970s are gone. But the present situation might nonetheless be more favorable for diplomatic relations given that the more important countervailing factors have all been severely weakened since the 1970s.

The first countervailing factor was a concern for South Korean retaliation. But the geopolitical conditions are significantly different today, so the risk of South Korean retaliation is far lower. In the present situation South Korea is winning the inter-Korean competition so thoroughly that it can hardly be called a competition anymore. Unlike the 1970s when it was unclear which of the two Koreas would emerge as the dominant one, today South Korea is clearly winning the economic, industrial, technological, military, and political race. North Korea's legitimacy has taken a nosedive due to an abysmal human rights record, economic collapse and famine in the 1990s, the development of nuclear weapons in the 2000s, and its unwillingness to abandon one of the most extreme forms of leader glorification the world has ever seen. South Korea's legitimacy, on the other hand, has shot up thanks to successful democratization, strong economic growth, and the emergence of a pop culture that has won admiration across the world. The alliance relationship with Washington is also arguably stronger today than it was in the 1970s when the US was planning to decrease its military presence in South Korea. In this new situation, South Korea can feel much more confident about both its ability to deter a North Korean attack and its status as the more legitimate of the two Koreas in the eyes of most people worldwide. That means that South Korea would be far less

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Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Gaikō ni kan
suru yoron chōsa [Survey on Foreign Policy]”
(2002-2025).

concerned about Japan establishing diplomatic relations with North Korea than in the past. South Korea might not welcome such relations, but it understands that Tokyo’s recognition of Pyongyang would not affect South Korea’s dominance over North Korea in any meaningful way. It is unlikely, therefore, that South Korea today would react to a normalization of Japan-North Korea relations with the same aggressiveness it so often displayed in the 1960s and 1970s.

As for the second countervailing factor – the lack of benefits for Tokyo – there has also been a major shift, as diplomatic relations could be conducive to a solution to the abduction issue. If Japan were to establish diplomatic relations with North Korea, Japanese diplomats would obtain day-to-day communication with North Korean officials and thus increase the chances of a diplomatic breakthrough on the abduction issue. By being on the ground in North Korea, Japanese diplomats would also be able to gather more information about the abductees. Negotiations and information-gathering activities would surely be limited by the North Korean authorities, but such Japanese efforts would almost certainly be more fruitful than the current situation, in which Japan lacks a physical presence in North Korea. The abduction issue has thus increased the benefits of diplomatic relations.

The third countervailing factor, which relates to security and stability on the Korean Peninsula, has also diminished in significance. This shift is closely connected with the first shift. South Korea’s current military dominance makes a communist takeover of the Korean Peninsula highly unlikely. Japanese recognition of North Korea today would do very little to alter the power balance between the North and the South, which is now firmly in favor of the latter. It is therefore unlikely that Japanese policymakers are restrained from establishing diplomatic relations with North Korea by security concerns.

Unlike the 1970s, it is now not South Korean retaliation, lack of benefits, or security concerns that prevent Japan from recognizing North Korea, but rather the Japanese public’s strong feelings about the abduction issue. When asked about which North Korea-related issues they are interested in, strong supermajorities of over 70 percent of the respondents state interest in the abduction issue every year since 2002.⁶⁶ Almost every year the interest in the abduction issue is higher than interest in the nuclear and missile issues. Under such conditions, recognizing North Korea without a satisfactory resolution of the abduction issue would be political suicide. Given that there have been no significant developments in the abduction issue since 2004, when the returned abductees’ family members were allowed to move to Japan, the staying power of the abduction issue in the public consciousness has been remarkable. Nonetheless, there has been a slow but steady decline in public interest in the issue over the past 10 years. While almost 90 percent of Japanese respondents reported interest in the issue in 2014, recently the number has dropped to around 75 percent. The trend toward a weaker interest in the abduction issue is unmistakable. At some point in the future, the interest in the abduction issue might drop so low that the abduction issue loses its constraining power over Japanese diplomacy vis-à-vis North Korea. If that were to happen, which seems likely, one could argue that the conditions for diplomatic relations with North Korea have become more favorable than they were in the early 1970s. Contrary to the pessimistic reading, this optimistic reading implies that analysts might in fact exaggerate the difficulty of establishing diplomatic relations between Japan and North Korea.

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