

U.S., Japan and North Korea

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's trip to Washington this week was billed as a chance for him to establish the close personal relationship that his predecessor enjoyed with President Bush. While Prime Minister Junichiro

By Edward Royce

Koizumi got to shake his hips at Graceland, Mr. Abe's visit to Camp

David was a more somber affair, as the prime minister appears increasingly isolated from the six-party talks.

North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles has driven Washington and Tokyo together in recent years. Japan reacted harshly to North Korea's missile and nuclear tests. Tokyo went much further than the meek U.N. Security Council resolutions — imposing more stringent unilateral sanctions, including a ban on all North Korean ships in Japanese ports, restrictions on imports and entry of most North Korean nationals into Japan, and a freeze on bank remittances to North Korea from its ethnic Korean community. Tokyo also participates in the Bush administration's signature counter-proliferation activity — the Proliferation Security Initiative that other countries in the region have shunned.

Japan's pressure, but more significantly, the administration's decision to squeeze the small Macau-based Banco Delta Asia for its complicity in North Korean illicit activity, such as counterfeiting U.S. \$100 bills, is credited with getting North Korea back to the six-party table. U.S. willingness to discuss Banco Delta Asia, which froze approximately \$25 million in North Korean assets, led to the Feb. 13 agreement.

But 60 days plus after the agreement, Japan seems the only nation standing firm until it sees progress from North Korea on its nuclear program and the return of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea agents years ago. By this point, North Korea was supposed to freeze its reactor at Yongbyon and provide a full accounting of its nuclear program. That hasn't happened, and if history is any guide, North Korea will continue its manipulations.

While North Korea has so far

failed on its end of the bargain, the United States and South Korea have moved ahead with concessions. In moving to "resolve" the issues surrounding the Macau bank, the United States has gone from willing to return legitimate portions of the \$25 million to offering to return the funds to Py-

ongyang "for the betterment of the North Korean people," to returning the ill-gotten proceeds carte blanche. Last week, South Korea announced it would soon start shipping 400,000 tons of rice to North Korea.

Let's be clear: This is not simply food aid

that is highly unlikely to reach North Korea's people; this is another \$116 million subsidy to Kim Jong-il's military state.

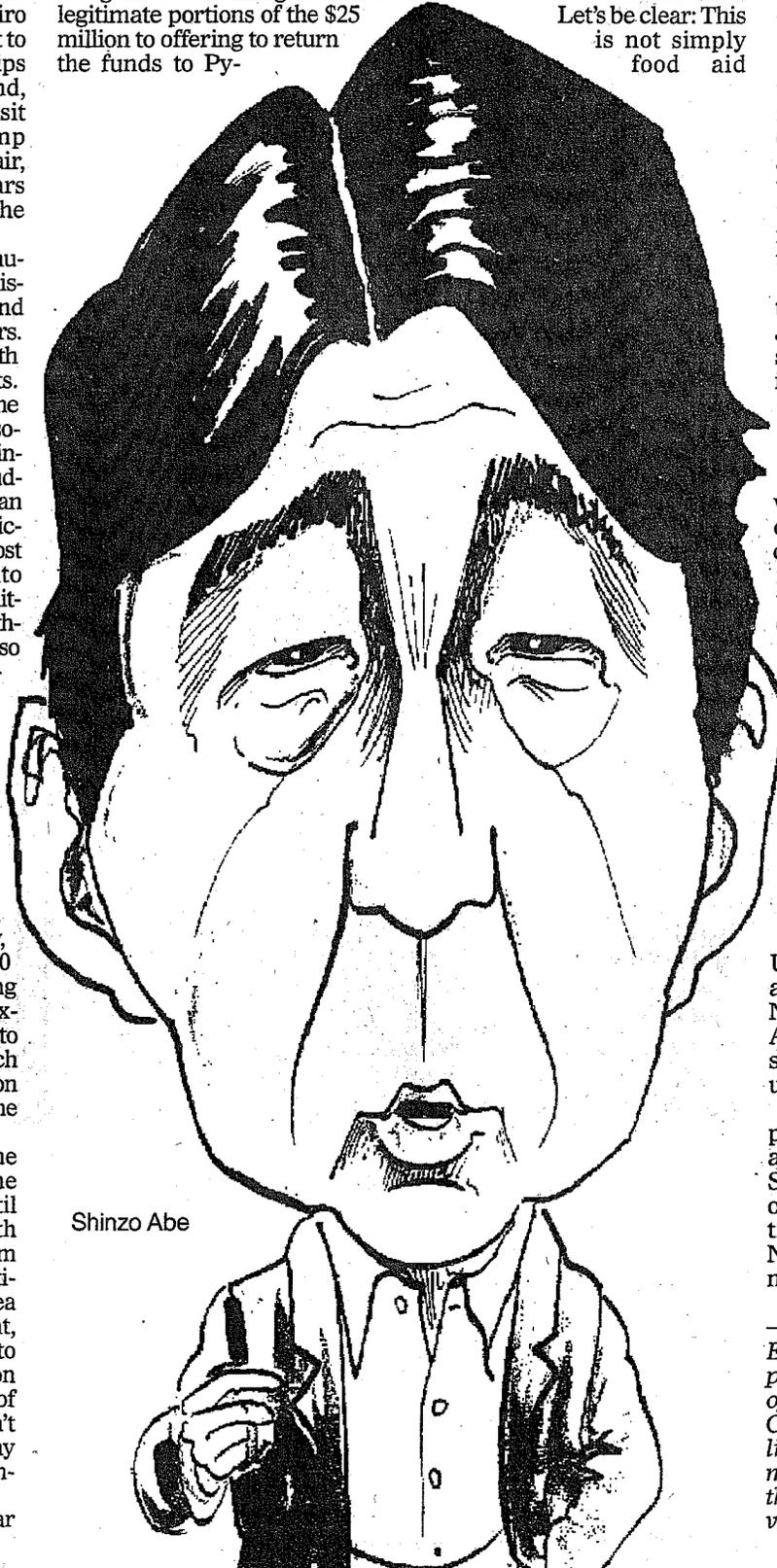
Prime Minister Abe — who cut his political teeth bringing attention to the abductee issue — surely pressed Mr. Bush to resist further concessions, such as North Korea's removal from the list of state sponsors of terrorism, until there is progress on the abductee issue. These Japanese citizens vanished off the streets during the 1970s and '80s; kidnapped by North Korean agents to teach spies how to pass as Japanese.

The abductee issue carries tremendous political weight in Japan, but it isn't parochial. We should all wonder: if Kim Jong-il can't come clean on abductions decades ago, what makes us believe he will come clean on his nuclear program?

Proponents of cutting a deal with Pyongyang have been quick to push such issues as counterfeiting and human rights to the side. Mr. Abe has to worry he will be pressured by other six-party states to drop his insistence on resolving the abduction issue.

It makes no sense to sideline Japan. It is perhaps the country most threatened by Pyongyang. The U.S.-Japan relationship has become one of America's most important: Japan moved to deploy forces in support of U.S. missions in Afghanistan and Iraq; cooperation on missile defense has flourished; more than 50,000 U.S. troops stationed in Japan are a hedge not just against North Korea, but rising China. As its North Korea stance shows, Japan understands the use of sticks as well as carrots.

To be sure, things aren't all perfect between Washington and Tokyo. But the United States now risks undermining one of its most crucial relationships in return for mere North Korean promises on its nuclear program.



Shinzo Abe

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