

The Forgotten Victims of the Atomic Bomb:

North Korean *Pipokja* and the Politics of Victimhood in Japan-DPRK Relations¹

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ABSTRACT:

This article examines the redress campaign waged by activists in Japan on behalf of roughly 2,000 North Korean A-bomb victims (*pipokja*). These victims were repatriated from Japan after being subjected to the 1945 US nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, while under colonial rule. From the early 1990s through to the twenty-first century, activists in Japan pursued redress for these A-bomb survivors in close synchronicity with the redress movements centred on South Korean victims. Highlighting the potential of the individual as entrepreneur within collective action settings, the redress developments were initiated and largely driven by an activist, Lee Sil-gun (1929–2020).

Although Tokyo and Pyongyang were initially reluctant to acknowledge that A-bomb survivors existed in North Korea, in the face of sustained pressure by the Japan-based activists, the two governments facilitated a limited redress process for the victims by making various concessions on the issue. How did these activists navigate the structural constraints of the authoritarian North Korean state and the volatile bilateral relationship in enacting their transnational activism? How were they able to elicit concessions on their redress objectives from Tokyo and Pyongyang in the absence of formalized diplomatic relations? Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Japan and South Korea, this article probes these questions by empirically tracing and analyzing the evolution of the redress campaign for the North Korean A-bomb victims. I utilize the concept of polyilateral diplomacy to elucidate the dynamic of engagement between the activists and the two governments.

Keywords: Japan-North Korea relations, atomic bomb victims, *pipokja*, nuclear weapons, victimhood, transnational redress, polyilateral diplomacy

DOI: 10.5509/202396161

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Acknowledgement: I am grateful to editor Hyung Gu Lynn and two anonymous reviewers for their very insightful comments. The manuscript also benefitted considerably from written feedback by, or discussions with, Rikki Kersten, Andrew Levidis, Geoffrey Wiseman, Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Ruth Barraclough, Peter Lee, Robert Cribb, Leonid Petrov, and members of the international relations department at the Australian National University. An early version of the paper was presented at a graduate student conference at Keio University.

In August of 1945, the United States dropped atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in a bid to hasten Japan's surrender.² The human toll of these attacks, including both fatalities and irradiated survivors, amounted to roughly 700,000. It is a lesser-known fact that approximately 10 percent of the A-bomb casualties originated from the Korean Peninsula—a Japanese imperial conquest.³ They had been resident in Japan at the time of the bombings mainly under colonial auspices. A majority of the Koreans who survived their exposure to the A-bombs were repatriated to a newly divided homeland in the postwar period as part of a wider "return" of their compatriots.⁴ An estimated 2,000 survivors consequently came to reside under the repressive regime of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (hereafter DPRK or North Korea).⁵ They were variously afflicted with burns, blast injuries, and radiation-induced illness that would plague them physically and mentally for the rest of their lives.

The plight of these North Korean A-bomb survivors and their quest for redress have been largely neglected in scholarly inquiry. Research on the redress pursuits of colonial-era Korean victims has focused almost exclusively on those who were repatriated to, or continued to reside in, the southern half of the Korean Peninsula. The movements waged by South Korean victims in pursuance of compensation and apologies from Tokyo have been characterized by a highly visible and confrontational tactical repertoire. With the support of activists in South Korea, Japan, and various other countries throughout the world, they have held press conferences, staged protests in front of Japan's diplomatic missions, conducted transnational litigation, and erected statues portraying and commemorating their victimhood. The structural conditions that principally informed and enabled the selection of these pressure tactics were normalized diplomatic relations between Seoul and Tokyo, democratic transition in South Korea, and liberalized outbound

¹ *Pipokja* is the Korean term for irradiated person/s.

² Scholars have long debated Washington's motivations for dropping the atom bombs and the role that the bombs played in Japan's decision to surrender. For the contours of these respective debates, see J. Samuel Walker, "Recent Literature on Truman's Atomic Bomb Decision: A Search for Middle Ground," *Diplomatic History* 29, no. 2 (2005): 311–334, and Asada Sadao, "The Shock of the Atomic Bomb and Japan's Decision to Surrender: A Reconsideration," *Pacific Historical Review* 67, no. 4 (1998): 479–485.

³ This statistic was determined on the basis of data gathered by the Korea Atomic Bomb Victims Association in Hiroshima. Ichiba Junko, *Hiroshima wo Mochikaetta Hitobito "Kankoku no Hiroshima" wa Naze Umareta no ka* [Those who brought back Hiroshima: How did "Korea's Hiroshima" come to be?] (Tokyo: Gaifūsha, 2005): 27–29. On the difficulties of obtaining precise numbers of Korean A-bomb victims, see Yang Dong Sook, "Hirosimahyeon joseonin pipokja hyeonbuihoeui gyeolseong-gwa wonsupong geumji undong," [The formation of the Hiroshima Prefectural Korean Association for A-bomb victims and the movement to ban the bomb] *Geok-gwa jeonmang* 38 (2018): 218–219.

⁴ See, Tessa Morris-Suzuki, *Exodus to North Korea: Shadows from Japan's Cold War* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

⁵ Kim Yong-gil, *Hanguk wonpok pihajea 65 nyeonsa* [A 65-year history of Korean A-bomb victims] (Seoul: Korean Atomic Bomb Victims Association Incorporated, 2011), 252.

travel in both countries.⁶ The opportunities provided by these structures allowed the victims and their supporters to travel rather freely between the addressee and target states—South Korea and Japan, respectively—and to encourage interventions from third-party governments and international organizations.

One might assume from the comparatively restricted opportunity structure in North Korea, its lack of official diplomatic ties with Tokyo, and the erratic nature of the bilateral relationship that there have been no substantive redress developments in connection to its resident colonial-era victims. In fact, however, from the early 1990s through to the twenty-first century, activists in Japan were pursuing redress for the North Korean A-bomb survivors in close synchronicity with the movements centred on South Korean victims. Owing to the significant personal risks entailed in advocating for the victims north of the 38th parallel, far fewer activists mobilized in support of them than those who coalesced around victims in the south. Indeed, the activists concerned ventured to the DPRK amid diplomatic turmoil between Tokyo and Pyongyang, North Korean missile tests, eventual nuclear tests, cascading sanctions against the Kim regime, and a rising tide of anti-North Korean sentiment in Japan. Although Tokyo and Pyongyang were initially reluctant to acknowledge that A-bomb survivors existed in North Korea, in the face of sustained pressure by these Japan-based activists, the two governments facilitated a limited redress process for the victims by making various concessions on the issue. Notably, Pyongyang afforded the victims priority medical treatment, free public transport access, and convened an exhibition in commemoration of the nuclear horror they had endured. Tokyo went so far as to formulate a policy entailing the provision of relief funds from government coffers to the victims—a course of action it ultimately reneged on.

How did the Japan-based activists navigate the structural constraints of the authoritarian North Korean state and the volatile bilateral relationship in enacting their transnational activism? How were they able to elicit concessions on their redress objectives from Tokyo and Pyongyang in the absence of formalized diplomatic relations? In view of the lack of a comprehensive record of these interactions, this article probes these questions by empirically tracing and analyzing the evolution of the redress campaign for the North Korean A-bomb victims. It finds that key to the activists' success in both respects was their ability to establish complementary relations and negotiate effectively with Tokyo and Pyongyang officials. Their capacity to do so was facilitated by structural shifts engendered by developments in the Kim regime's pursuit of nuclear capability and the rise of diplomatic normalization on the bilateral agenda. The ability of the activists to extract concessions was contingent upon the degree of convergence between their redress objectives and the national and diplomatic interests

⁶ Outbound travel was liberalized in Japan and South Korea in the 1960s and 1980s, respectively.

of Tokyo and Pyongyang. A tentative and provisional convergence emerged between the activists' objectives and Tokyo's desire to drive the normalization agenda forward. A more pronounced and sustained convergence materialized in relation to Pyongyang's motivation of legitimizing its nascent nuclear capability and buttressing its claims to compensation for Japanese colonial transgressions. In accordance with these variations, the activists extracted more substantial concessions from Pyongyang than Tokyo.

Highlighting the potential of the individual as entrepreneur within collective action settings, the redress developments were initiated and largely driven by an activist of the name Lee Sil-gun (1929–2020). Lee first established an informal channel of communication with the Kim Il-sung government, which became institutionalized over time in the form of reciprocal A-bomb victim advocacy organizations in Hiroshima and Pyongyang. This channel provided a sustained means of engaging with North Korean officials and served as a buffer against some of the volatilities of the bilateral relationship. Lee and the activists who came to support his cause mobilized this communication channel to assume the role of *de facto* diplomatic actors: they conducted regular fact-finding missions in North Korea to ascertain numbers of A-bomb victims there and to survey their health status; wrote reports on the findings of these missions and delivered them to relevant Japanese government ministries; facilitated the dispatching of doctors from Japan to Pyongyang to train their North Korean counterparts in the treatment of A-bomb-related diseases and provide specialized medical care to the victims; and at times acted as intermediaries between the two governments in connection to the issue.

The dynamic of engagement between the activists and the two governments is best encapsulated by Geoffrey Wiseman's concept of polyilateral diplomacy, which denotes "the conduct of relations between official entities" and "at least one unofficial, non-state entity in which there is a reasonable expectation of systematic relationships, involving some form of reporting, communication, negotiation, and representation, but not involving mutual recognition as sovereign, equivalent entities."⁷ The strategy adopted by the Japan-based activists was informed by the imperative of having official sanction from both governments for their redress efforts. This in turn necessitated the use of non-confrontational pressure tactics, which mostly entailed negotiating with officials. As argued by Wiseman, polyilateral non-state engagement is more appealing to officials "when the process involves low-key, systematic relations and less appealing when it is confrontational." Their mode of activism

⁷ Geoffrey Wiseman, "Polyilateralism: Diplomacy's Third Dimension," *Public Diplomacy Magazine* 4 (2010): 24. The concept of polyilateral diplomacy can be distinguished from citizen diplomacy, which does not necessarily entail interaction with officials. Given that most of the activists involved in the redress campaign were of Japanese ethnicity, as mentioned further on in the article, their engagement with Pyongyang and Tokyo cannot be conceptualized as diaspora diplomacy.

therefore did not play out in the public eye: it was mostly conducted in the confines of government offices in Japan and behind the cloak of North Korea's hard border.

In tracing the trajectory of the redress campaign for the A-bomb victims in the DPRK, this article utilizes qualitative analysis of empirical data drawn from a range of sources collected during fieldwork in Japan and South Korea. The sources include 12 semi-structured interviews that were conducted by the author with seven subjects between 2011 and 2014, and with two additional subjects via email in 2022. A purposive snowball method was employed to recruit the interview subjects in light of the limited number of activists involved in the redress campaign. The majority of these interviews were carried out in Hiroshima and Tokyo, and some additional ones were undertaken in Hapcheon and Seoul with South Korea-based activists and A-bomb victims for historical and analytical context.⁸ The interview material utilized in this study is supplemented and cross-referenced where possible with archived and more recent newspaper articles, the published memoir of Lee Sil-gun, a compilation of A-bomb survivor testimonials, and fact-finding survey results collated by the activists. Due to difficulties encountered in securing interviews with the Japanese officials involved in the issue, their role—and that of North Korean officials—is mostly established on the basis of newspaper publications, government records, accounts of activists who interacted with them, and an interview conducted via email with a former member of the Japanese Diet.

The article proceeds in four sections. The first outlines the process by which ethnic Koreans came to constitute such a significant proportion of the A-bomb casualties and the logic and means by which they established Japan as the target state for their redress. The second section traces Lee Sil-gun's initiation of the redress campaign for the North Korean victims and profiles the Japan-based activists who came to support his cause. The third evaluates the activists' ability to elicit concessions on their objectives through an examination of key developments in the redress campaign. The fourth section assesses the final stages of the campaign and the structural forces that ultimately constrained the agency of the activists. The facts of the case in question will be examined throughout the article against some of Wiseman's theoretical propositions about polyilateral diplomacy.

The Colonial Dimensions of the Korean A-bomb Victim Issue

There are two overarching questions to first address which will provide historical and analytical context. Precisely how did Koreans come to comprise

⁸ Hapcheon County, located in South Korea's South Gyeongsang Province, has been host to the highest population concentration of surviving A-bomb victims in South Korea since they were repatriated.

10 percent of the A-bomb casualties in Japan? And why has the burden of redress provision for Korean and other overseas A-bomb survivors fallen solely on the shoulders of the Japanese government? One might expect that the United States—the party responsible for dropping the bombs—would be held at least partially, if not wholly, accountable by the victims for their plight. The answer to both of these questions lies in the Japanese colonial legacy.

When Japan annexed the Korean Peninsula in 1910, all Korean nationals became subjects of the Japanese Empire. They migrated in the hundreds of thousands to the Japanese archipelago in a variety of circumstances under the colonial power structure. Some sought to escape deprivation in colonial Korea and secure their livelihoods in Japan. Many others were mobilized to serve in the Japanese Imperial Army or to undertake forced labour in the military industrial factories that supported its advance. The onset of World War II witnessed a sharp increase in this latter migratory category as thousands of Koreans were coercively recruited by Japanese authorities under the aegis of the National Conscription Edict. As a result of these conscription drives, thousands of Koreans found themselves labouring in munitions plants in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The presence of such plants was a significant determinant in the designation of these cities as A-bomb targets. In May 1945 the US government's advisory committee on nuclear matters came to an agreement that the "most desirable target would be a vital war plant employing a large number of workers and closely surrounded by workers' houses."⁹ The numerous Korean labourers who were working at such plants and living in their vicinity would therefore have an elevated probability of exposure to the A-bombs. An estimated 70,000 Koreans were ultimately irradiated in the atomic bombings, of whom 40,000 perished and 30,000 survived.¹⁰ American diplomat Kurt W. Tong thus observed that "this final act of war engendered lasting misery for several thousands of the very people the United States was trying to liberate from Japanese domination."¹¹ In the decades that followed Japan's surrender, approximately 23,000 Korean A-bomb survivors were repatriated to the Korean Peninsula, a majority of whom—approximately 21,000—settled south of the 38th parallel, while a minority—roughly 2,000—settled in the north.¹² As a consequence of the arbitrary division of their homeland, these survivors found themselves living under two disparate regimes. The nature of these

⁹ "Notes on the Interim Committee Meeting," 31 May 1945, NA, RG 77, Manhattan Engineer District, Harrison Bundy Files, Folder No. 100, available online at <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/28519-document-18-notes-interim-committee-meeting-thursday-31-may-1945-1000-am-115-pm-215>.

¹⁰ Ichiba, *Hiroshima*, 27.

¹¹ Kurt W. Tong, "Korea's Forgotten Atomic Bomb Victims," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 23, no. 1 (1991): 31.

¹² Kim, *Hanguk wonpok pihaeja*, 213. Roughly 7,000 survivors remained in Japan.

regimes would have markedly different consequences for their life trajectories writ large, including their respective potential to be redressed for their victimization in decades to come.

The South Korean A-bomb victims began mobilizing for redress in the mid-1960s against the backdrop of the normalization of diplomatic relations between Seoul and Tokyo. They were spurred in part by the knowledge that Tokyo had enacted the Atomic Bomb Victims Relief Law in 1957 to provide state support to Japanese survivors. This legislation, which was updated in 1968 (hereafter, the relief law), did not encompass the ethnic Korean victims who had remained in Japan nor those who had been repatriated to the Korean Peninsula. This was despite the fact that they had been imperial subjects at the time of the bombings. To the further dismay of the survivors in South Korea, their plight was not discussed throughout the course of Tokyo and Seoul's normalization negotiations, a major objective of which was to reach a claims settlement for Korean victims of Japanese colonial policies. The South Korean survivors and their advocates have retrospectively viewed this disregard as a consequence of the United States' intervention in the normalization process; from their standpoint, neither Seoul nor Tokyo was willing to risk aggravating their mutual security guarantor by raising a potentially contentious issue that implicated Washington.¹³ Once Seoul and Tokyo entered formal diplomatic relations, the Korean survivors who had remained within Japan became eligible to apply for the relief law provisions, yet this was subject to them adopting South Korea-affiliated domicile status in Japan and becoming certified A-bomb victims.

Owing to the ongoing state-level neglect of the repatriated victims, a South Korean A-bomb survivor of the name Son Jin-doo travelled to Japan in 1970 in the hope of receiving specialized medical care and gaining access to the relief law provisions. He was promptly arrested for illegal entry, however, and confined to prison for two years. Upon his release, Son pioneered a decades-long litigation effort against the Japanese government that sought to challenge the relief law's legal residency requirement.¹⁴ Japan's Supreme Court ruled in favour of Son and 39 other South Korean plaintiffs in 1978, finding that Tokyo was responsible for providing relief provisions to A-bomb victims irrespective of their nationality.¹⁵ The logic behind this judgement was essentially two-fold: the bombs had been deployed in the context of a war that was prosecuted by Japan; and the relief law had no nationality clause and was by nature a humanitarian law that should be extended to all victims.

¹³ This view was widely expressed during interviews conducted by the author with A-bomb victims and their advocates in Seoul and Hapcheon County, 2012.

¹⁴ Agota Duró, "A Pioneer among the South Korean Atomic Bomb Victims: Significance of the Son Jin-doo Trial," *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* 4, no. 2 (2016): 271–292.

¹⁵ Nakajima Tatsumi, ed., "Chōsenjin hibakusha Son Jin-doo Saiban no Kiroku: Hibakusha hoshō no genten" [Court proceedings of Korean atomic bomb victim Son Jin-doo: Origins of A-bomb victim compensation] (Tokyo: Zaikan Hibakusha Mondai Shimin Kaigi, 1998).

Further legal efforts by South Korean plaintiffs enabled overseas A-bomb survivors to travel to Japan to obtain an Atomic Bomb Victims Passbook (*hibakusha techō*) and thus gain access to the relief law provisions. The court later relinquished this travel requirement in 2008, allowing overseas victims to apply for the *hibakusha techō* through Japanese embassies in their countries of residence. Although these legal provisions theoretically applied to the A-bomb victims in the north of the Korean Peninsula, a lack of liberalized outbound travel and the absence of Japanese diplomatic representation in Pyongyang occluded them from the relief law entitlements.

Besides Tokyo, South Korean victims have also long regarded Washington to be culpable for their plight on account of its role in the development and deployment of the A-bombs. Yet they refrained from pursuing this line of culpability on pragmatic grounds. They reasoned that a potential litigation battle in the United States, necessarily entailing multiple long-haul flights, would be financially infeasible. They also presumed that it would be difficult to establish Washington's liability in light of the lack of an admission—or demonstration of—any form of responsibility from American officials for the victims of the A-bombs.¹⁶ Tokyo, by contrast, set a legal precedent when it enacted the 1957 relief law and the litigation strategy of the South Korean victims thus became premised on this legislation. By successfully establishing Tokyo's culpability for their victimization, South Korean survivors cast the issue of redress in a post-imperial light.¹⁷

Lastly, it is worth noting that the decades of legal and political disenfranchisement endured by ethnic Korean A-bomb victims has been reflected linguistically in the perpetual delineation of their victimhood in the colonial language. Scholars and media institutions alike have persistently labelled victims of the atomic bomb—irrespective of their ethnicity—with the Japanese term *hibakusha* (radiation exposed person/s). The blanket use of this label has been particularly problematic in its application to survivors who were repatriated to the Korean Peninsula (i.e., Korean *hibakusha*) for two fundamental reasons. First, the *hibakusha* term only came into usage in the 1950s, a time when Korean A-bomb victims were no longer imperial subjects and had in fact been rendered stateless.¹⁸ Those who were returned to the peninsula adopted an equivalent term in their own vernacular, *pipokja*, by which they came to express their victimhood.¹⁹ Second, the all-inclusive

¹⁶ Kim Yong-kil (president of the Korean Atomic Bomb Victims Relief Association), interview by author, Seoul, 3 February 2012.

¹⁷ See Toyonaga Keisaburō, "Colonialism and Atom Bombs: About Survivors of Hiroshima Living in Korea," in *Perilous Memories: The Asia-Pacific War(s)*, eds. T. Fujitani, Geoffrey M. White, and Lisa Yoneyama (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 380.

¹⁸ Naono Akiko, "The Origins of 'Hibakusha' as a Scientific and Political Classification of the Survivor," *Japanese Studies* 39, no. 3 (2019): 333–352.

¹⁹ The South Korean A-bomb victims and their advocates that I interviewed in Hapcheon County and Seoul in 2012 used the term *pipokja*, as did the North Korean medical practitioners that feature in Itō Takashi's documentary that was filmed mostly in the DPRK. Lee Nam-Jae (member of Hapcheon

use of the *hibakusha* label has been suffused with the assumption that those who were subjected to the nuclear attacks of 1945 share a common victim status and identity. Yet scholars have documented significant variations in both the lived experience and post-bombing treatment of victims of Korean and Japanese ethnicities.²⁰ They have noted that ethnic Koreans were often more vulnerable to exposure to the A-bomb blasts on account of the nature of the work they were engaged in: commonly, forced labour.²¹ Koreans furthermore had relatively limited opportunity to seek refuge in the homes of friends or extended family in distal locations from the A-bomb hypocentres, a factor that rendered them more susceptible to the effects of residual radiation.²² There were moreover instances of overwhelmed hospitals turning away victims of Korean ethnicity in the aftermath of the bombings in preference for treating their Japanese counterparts.²³ Ultimately, the peripheral status of Korean A-bomb victims came to be reflected and crystallized in Japan's memory landscape of the atomic bombings.²⁴ In view of these inequities and those in relation to the selective and fractured distribution of the *hibakusha techō* and implementation of the relief law, this article conceives of the ethnic Koreans who were irradiated in Hiroshima and Nagasaki as a distinct and marginalized category of A-bomb victims. It will convey this by referring to them as *pipokja* rather than *hibakusha*.²⁵

Establishing a Communication Channel with North Korea

The pivotal role of Son Jin-doo in forging a legal pathway to redress for South Korean A-bomb victims exemplifies the ascendant status that individuals often occupy within collective action settings. Several key developments in

House of Peace), interview by author, Hapcheon, 13 March 2012; *Hiroshima-Pyonyan: Suterareta Hibakusha* [Hiroshima-Pyongyang: the discarded A-bomb victims], directed by Itō Takashi (Nagoya: Hiroshima-Pyonyan Inkaei, 2009).

²⁰ This is not intended to deemphasize the prodigious suffering endured by Japanese A-bomb victims, but to draw a conceptual distinction between victims of Japanese and Korean ethnicities.

²¹ Yang "Hirosimayeon," 217; Tong, "Korea's Forgotten," 31.

²² Yang, "Hirosimayeon," 217; Tong, "Korea's Forgotten," 31.

²³ Tong, "Korea's Forgotten," 31.

²⁴ Lisa Yoneyama, "Memory Matters: Hiroshima's Korean Atom Bomb Memorial and the Politics of Ethnicity," *Public Culture* 7, no. 3 (1995): 499–527; Olga Barbasiewicz, "Hidden Memory and Memorials: The Monument in Memory of the Korean Victims of the Atomic Bomb and the Remembrance of Korean Victims," *Polish Political Science Yearbook* 48, no. 2: 289–303; Erik Ropers, "Contested Spaces of Ethnicity: Zainichi Korean Accounts of the Atomic Bombings," *Critical Military Studies* 1, no. 2 (2015): 145–159; Yuko Takahashi, "Identities Surrounding a Cenotaph for Korean Atomic Bomb Victims," *Korean Studies* 42 (2018): 64–90.

²⁵ Another Korean term for A-bomb victims is *wonpok pihaeja* (atomic bomb victims, or *genbaku higaisha* in Japanese), which tends to appear in more formal settings such as the titles of advocacy organizations. While Japan-based activists supporting A-bomb victims of Korean ethnicity tend to use the term *hibakusha* in reference to the victims, this usage reflects their specific activist objective of seeking recognition of and support for such victims in Japanese society. The conceptual distinction between *pipokja* and *hibakusha* is more important for scholarly purposes.

the trajectory of the North Korean *pipokja* issue can similarly be attributed to the efforts of an individual activist: Lee Sil-gun. In his capacity as an A-bomb survivor and prominent activist in Japan, Lee forged a communication channel with Pyongyang that became the primary mechanism through which redress would be enacted for the victims.²⁶ While Wiseman posits that non-democracies are less inclined to engage polylaterally with non-state actors than democratic states, we see in this case that the North Korean government found utility in Lee's activist credentials for the advancement of its national and diplomatic interests.²⁷ Building relationships with activists residing in states of interest assumes particular importance for non-democracies when formal diplomatic approaches are limited or failing, or when diplomatic relations are non-existent. Such relationships can evolve into alternative channels for the management of bilateral issues. Lee Sil-gun was able to capitalize on the Kim regime's initial interest in him to establish a complementary relationship with officials in Pyongyang and promote his own agenda of redressing the *pipokja* in North Korea. His trusted standing in Pyongyang paved the way for other Japan-based activists—most of whom were Japanese—to become engaged in this redress cause.

The redress campaign for the North Korean *pipokja* had its inception in 1989, a juncture at which the Eastern Bloc was collapsing and Pyongyang was restructuring its foreign relations. In July of that year, the Kim Il-sung government invited Lee Sil-gun—a Hiroshima-based activist—to share his experience of the 1945 atomic bombings at the occasion of the 13th World Festival of Youth and Students.²⁸ The DPRK's decision to host this festival, which was organized under the banner "For Anti-Imperialist Solidarity, Peace and Friendship," was widely regarded as a competitive response to Seoul's staging of the 1988 Olympic Games and as an attempt to improve the nation's international standing. Lee Sil-gun was an obvious invitee to the festival: his anti-imperialist credentials would have appeared impeccable. In addition to his status as a victim-survivor of Washington's nuclear attack on Hiroshima, he had been arrested in 1950 under the US-led Allied occupation of Japan for scattering handbills from the second floor of a cinema that denounced "America's war" against North Korea as "unjust." After posting bail he failed to appear for trial at an American military court in Kokura, and instead, took on a fake name and embarked on life as a fugitive in Hiroshima. He was recaptured in 1952 and consequently imprisoned for eight years in Hiroshima and Yamaguchi prefectures.²⁹

²⁶ Lee was born to Korean parents in Japan's Yamaguchi prefecture, which lies adjacent to Hiroshima, in 1929.

²⁷ Wiseman, "Polylateralism," 32.

²⁸ Lee Sil-gun, interview by author, 12 December 2012; Kaneko Testuo (Gensuikin representative), interview by author, via email, 8 November 2022.

²⁹ Lee, *Puraido*, 81–109.

In 1989, a turning-point year, the North Korean leadership was furthermore seeking to enhance its connections with sympathetic left-wing Japanese political organizations as a means to establish closer diplomatic and commercial relations with Japan;³⁰ this policy war had been precipitated by the disintegration of the Soviet Union—Pyongyang's key economic ally. Lee Sil-gun had an equally impressive track record in this regard. He had participated actively in the ethnic Korean movements that proliferated in the aftermath of Japan's defeat, most of which were supportive of the newly instated North Korean leader Kim Il-sung. He had also set up his own advocacy organization for Korean A-bomb survivors in Japan. Most importantly, he had refused to adopt South Korean nationality when Tokyo encouraged this course of action after normalizing its diplomatic ties with Seoul; he therefore retained the legal status of *Chōsen-seki* (Korean domicile) which came to be associated with North Korea in Japan.³¹

Lee's attendance at the festival would have been particularly welcome in Pyongyang amid increasing efforts from Seoul and Washington to curtail the regime's nuclear ambitions. Only three months prior to the festival, in May 1989, a delegation of American intelligence officials had travelled to Seoul to inform members of the South Korean government that they had obtained evidence indicating that a plutonium reprocessing plant was under construction in the North Korean county of Yongbyon. In their view, this plant constituted the foundation of a nuclear arsenal.³² On the basis of the proceedings of this meeting, which were immediately leaked to the South Korean press, Washington and Seoul began to formulate a coordinated diplomatic strategy aimed at halting the Kim regime's latent nuclear program.³³ With 90 American delegates—including 20 journalists—expected at the festival in Pyongyang, Lee's testimonial as an A-bomb survivor and advocate for Koreans subjected to US nuclear attacks while under colonial rule would potentially lend domestic credence to the need to develop a nuclear capability for deterrence purposes; indeed, the United States still had tactical nuclear weapons stationed in South Korea. Already a regular speaker at anti-nuclear rallies events and rallies around the world by this stage, Lee was known for speaking in graphic detail about the carnage and destruction that he witnessed when walking through Hiroshima as a 16-year-old the day after the bomb was dropped.

From the standpoint of Lee Sil-gun, the invitation from Pyongyang merely represented an opportunity to reconnect with friends who had been repatriated to North Korea, and a chance to advance his anti-nuclear agenda

³⁰ Seung K. Ko, "North Korea's Relations with Japan since Détente," *Pacific Affairs* 50, no. 1 (1977): 34–35.

³¹ Lee Sil-gun, interview, 12 December 2012.

³² Michael J. Mazarr, *North Korea and the Bomb: A Case Study in Nonproliferation* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1995): 35.

³³ Mazarr, *North Korea*, 35.

in a country with which he felt an ethnic connection.³⁴ His sojourn to the DPRK took an unexpected turn, however, when he was approached at his hotel by ten of the North Korean *pipokja*; they learned of his arrival through festival publicity and took advantage of the nation's brief opening up to the world to seek help.³⁵ Lee was well aware that many A-bomb survivors had settled north of the 38th parallel, having witnessed some of them board repatriation ships bound for the DPRK in the decades following Japan's surrender. Yet he had not anticipated that they would be in such a dire predicament 44 years after the A-bombs had been dropped. In the absence of specialized medical care, they were resorting to primitive methods to self-treat their A-bomb-related maladies.³⁶ Adding to their anguish was the fact that the North Korean government had yet to recognize them as victims. On the basis of these revelations, Lee resolved to focus his A-bomb victim advocacy efforts exclusively on addressing their plight. Upon his return to Japan he learned that the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (*Chōsen sōren*), an organization that has functioned as North Korea's de facto embassy in Tokyo, was unwilling to take up the issue. Lee therefore established an organization in Hiroshima that would be specifically dedicated to his cause, the Liaison Council of North Korean Atomic Bomb Victims, which became a channel of communication with Pyongyang. He had thus seized the opportunity of the Festival invitation and his nascent connection with North Korean officials to launch a redress campaign.

Lee Sil-gun was well poised to navigate both the authoritarian structure of the North Korean regime and the challenges entailed in advocating for suppressed nuclear victims in an aspiring nuclear state. By 1989 he had accrued over 35 years of experience as a participant in various activist organizations in Japan. His ideological background also rendered him a trustworthy associate in the eyes of both North Korean officials and the *pipokja*. While often labelled “pro-Pyongyang” by the Japanese media, the ideologies that animated Lee's activism can more accurately be described as anti-imperialist, pro-unification of the Korean Peninsula, anti-nuclear weapons, and anti-discrimination against Koreans in Japan. Since his release from prison, moreover, he had departed from the confrontational, anti-establishment-fuelled tactics that had characterized his early activism to embrace a more constructive and cooperative modus operandi; this was marked by the utilization of his interpersonal skills to establish relationships with government officials and the exertion of influence through persuasive prowess. This mode of activism would set the tone for how he and his supporters would advocate for the North Korean A-bomb victims.

Through his extensive networks in Japan, Lee Sil-gun was able to attract

³⁴ Lee Sil-gun, interview, 12 December 2012.

³⁵ Lee Sil-gun, interview, 12 December 2012.

³⁶ Lee Sil-gun, interview, 12 December 2012.

a number of highly experienced activists to take part in his delegations to North Korea and meetings with the Japanese government. Those who became engaged in this cause were affiliated with one or more of the following organizations: Gensuibaku Kinshi Nihon Kokumin Kaigi (Japan Congress Against A- and H-Bombs, hereafter, Gensuikin), one of two major anti-nuclear groups in Japan, which Lee had become a member of in 1975; the Japan Teachers Union; various A-bomb victim advocacy groups; and the Japan Federation of Bar Association. A photo journalist of the name Itō Takashi also accompanied Lee on one of his delegations for the purpose of documenting it.³⁷ Over time, some of the activists involved in the issue organized their own delegations to North Korea, but Lee Sil-gun remained the centripetal force behind the redress campaign.³⁸ The participation of the activists was driven by a combination of interests in advancing anti-nuclear objectives, protecting the human rights of North Koreans, and atoning for Japan's colonial past. In shouldering the burden of redress provision for the North Korean A-bomb victims, the onus of which Japan's Supreme Court had placed on the Japanese government, the activists assumed the role of de facto diplomats.³⁹ They were able to do so by mobilizing the communication channel established with Pyongyang.

Enacting Redress

Throughout the 1990s, these Japan-based activists were able to elicit a number of concessions from both Pyongyang and Tokyo in support of the North Korean *pipokja*. The ability of the activists to bring the two governments into the fold of their advocacy efforts was a result of convergence between the activists' objectives and the national and diplomatic interests of the two governments. The interactions between the various parties shed light on Wiseman's assumption that officials are more likely to engage polylaterally with non-state actors on issues of "low politics" than "high politics."⁴⁰ This reflects the postulation that polylateral diplomacy tends to be embraced by democracies. We find in this case that while the activists' "low politics" humanitarian framing of their redress campaign appealed to Japanese officials, the authoritarian North Korean government was more attracted by the "high politics" atomic bomb origins of the case and its associations with national security.

³⁷ While beyond the scope of this article, Itō Takashi's wider efforts to document the plight of the North Korean *pipokja* through film and photography is an important avenue for further research.

³⁸ These delegations can be distinguished from the concept of transnational advocacy networks in that the activities of the activists involved in the issue were not structured within a network. The activists all had a connection to Lee Sil-gun but not necessarily to each another.

³⁹ This concept of "de facto diplomats" is developed in Yolanda Kemp Spies in her book *Global Diplomacy and International Society* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

⁴⁰ Wiseman, "Polylateralism," 33.

The first major initiative of the activists was to arrange for a North Korean delegation to visit Japan. In July of 1990, Lee Sil-gun and some Gensuikin members requested permission from Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) to invite a four-member group of North Korean delegates—including one *pipokja*—to attend an anti-nuclear conference in Japan in commemoration of the 45th anniversary of the atomic bombings. The visit would represent an opportunity to attract public and media attention to the issue and garner support for their redress cause within the anti-nuclear community. While the MOFA's position was that little could be done for the North Korean victims at an official level in the absence of formal diplomatic relations, it was willing to offer its tacit support of their activities. This was in the context of Tokyo preparing to enter normalization talks with Pyongyang and seeking ways to improve its relations in the lead-up to this process. The emphasis of the activists on alleviating the plight of the victims in North Korea aligned with this diplomatic objective, and also resonated with the “humanitarian” trope in Tokyo's foreign policy; this is commonly mobilized in relation to claims by former colonial victims to emphasize a distinction from the concept of human rights and as a means to downplay any obligation to assist them under international law. The activists' request was therefore approved by Tokyo and the delegation arrived the following month. Motoshima Hitoshi, the mayor of Nagasaki, issued an apology to North Korean victims at the anti-nuclear conference for Japan's lack of assistance to them over the past 45 years, signifying the beginning of a limited redress process.⁴¹

Lee subsequently embarked on organizing delegations of Japanese activists to North Korea to ascertain the number of resident A-bomb survivors there and to grasp their circumstances. While the DPRK government has proven to be highly averse to the imposition of rights-based claims on its citizens by foreign nationals, it began to grant the activists largely unprecedented access in North Korea to conduct their activities in relation to the *pipokja*.⁴² This was despite the fact that many of them were Japanese nuclear abolitionists who could not necessarily lay claim to Lee Sil-gun's calibre of anti-imperialist credentials. To understand this anomaly, one need only look to the activists' discursive position: they were largely united by a belief that the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki constituted a crime against humanity. As elaborated by lawyer activist Takagi Kenichi, the bombings were essentially an “indiscriminate attack on civilian population centres.”⁴³ Lee expressed a similar stance in media interviews.⁴⁴ While the intended

⁴¹ “Nagasaki Mayor Apologises to North Korean Atomic Bomb Survivor,” *Japan Economic Newswire*, 7 August 1990.

⁴² Itō Takashi, for instance, travelled to North Korea no less than 43 times in his bid to document the plight of the *pipokja*.

⁴³ Takagi Kenichi, interview by author, Tokyo, 18 December 2012.

⁴⁴ “Exhibition of Over 1 Million Antinuke Signatures Starts at the UN,” *Economic Times*, 25 March 2011.

connotations were rather different, the activists' views of the 1945 nuclear attacks would have resonated with the Kim government's characterization of the United States as a "nuclear criminal." This has been the North Korean leadership's standard retort when criticized by Washington in relation to its development of nuclear weapons.

On the occasion of their first delegation to the DPRK in February 1992, the activists discovered that the North Korean authorities had begun to formally recognize the *pipokja*: they were conducting an official fact-finding investigation into the issue and had tasked the Korean National Peace Committee with pursuing a comprehensive aid package for the victims from Tokyo.⁴⁵ There were two clear incentives for Pyongyang to confer recognition at this point, decades after the victims had been repatriated to North Korea. America's CIA was by now convinced that North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programs "are our most urgent national security threat in East Asia."⁴⁶ For Pyongyang, confirming the presence of (potentially thousands of) victims of US nuclear attacks within the nation's borders, would add a layer of credibility—even if only for internal purposes—to its logic that nuclear weapons were required for deterrence; every victim identified would serve as living testament to the threat posed by Washington's nuclear arsenal. Second, in the course of its normalization talks with Tokyo, Pyongyang had latched onto an agenda of extracting compensation for Japanese colonial transgressions; the collation of official data on the number of colonial victims in the DPRK would serve to buttress its claims for reparations.

An opportunity presented for the activists to encourage a more direct intervention from the Japanese politicians when a series of tectonic shifts occurred in Japan's domestic political landscape. The first of these occurred in 1993 when the 38-year run of unrivalled dominance by the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) came to an end, ushering in an era of coalition politics. The most important development from the activists' perspective was that the following year the Japan Socialist Party (JSP), which had close institutional links with Gensuikin, entered into a three-way ruling coalition with the LDP and the New Party Sakigake. Through their Gensuikin affiliation, Lee and some of his supporters had already forged close relations with a number of JSP members; these connections provided them with a more direct line of influence to the ruling cabinet and helped to elevate the issue on the government agenda. These JSP members, including Nakagawa Tomoko and Tsujimoto Kiyomi, began to provide consistent backing for the activists' redress objectives.

Emboldened by this favourable transformation in the political landscape,

⁴⁵ Lee Sil-gun, interview, 27 September 2013.

⁴⁶ United States Congress Committee on Governmental Affairs, *Weapons Proliferation in the New World Order: Hearing Before the Committee on Governmental Affairs United States Senate, One Hundred Second Congress Second Session* (Washington, DC: 15 January 1992), 41.

the activists set their sights on the realization of an official relief program for the victims. On one of their missions to Pyongyang in April 1995, they found that the North Korean government had begun to advocate for the victims: it had set up an organization dedicated to pursuing aid from Tokyo, the Korean Atomic Bomb Victims Association for Anti-Nuclear Peace, that reported to the secretary general of the Korean National Peace Committee, Choe Kyong-rin.⁴⁷ A radiologist had been appointed to lead the organization and an A-bomb survivor, Park Mun-suk, had been designated its vice president. The establishment of this advocacy organization, which was roughly analogous and reciprocal to the one that Lee headed in Hiroshima, served to institutionalize the channel of communication between the North Korean leadership and activists in Japan; it enabled the two parties to report to one another and coordinate their advocacy efforts. Metaphorically, the channel represented an imperial-Cold War connection between Hiroshima and Pyongyang, two cities that had been levelled respectively by indiscriminate American atomic and incendiary bombing. Over the next few years, the organization in Pyongyang would start to issue certificates to the *pipokja* enabling them to receive preferential medical access and free public transport in North Korea.⁴⁸

In terms of eliciting concessions from Tokyo, the most consequential development for Lee and his supporters was the rise of Obuchi Keizō and Nonaka Hiromu to the respective positions of prime minister and chief cabinet secretary in July 1998. Although a member of the conservative Liberal Democratic Party, Obuchi departed from the policy lines of his LDP predecessors in significant respects, particularly in relation to managing history-related problems with neighbouring countries. Nonaka, for his part, was an advocate of food aid to North Korea and had become acquainted with Lee Sil-gun a few years earlier after taking an interest in his activism in relation to the *pipokja*. Lee referred to the two politicians as a “supportive coalition” and frequently liaised with them both over the course of Obuchi’s prime ministerial term.⁴⁹

During the early stages of his leadership tenure Obuchi expressed a willingness to support the North Korean *pipokja* and delegated authority on the matter to Nonaka. Lee and some Gensuikin members were then granted a meeting with Nonaka in March of 1999 at the prime minister’s office. They requested Nonaka’s permission to arrange a study trip for North Korean doctors to Japan, an initiative that was supported by Socialist Democratic Party of Japan (SDPJ, formerly the Japan Socialist Party, JSP) member Nakagawa Tomoko. Nonaka responded positively to the proposal and conveyed that he would discuss it with Japanese doctors and foreign ministry colleagues. He added the caveat that his government could not fund the trip

⁴⁷ “Group Surveying Atomic Bomb Victims in N. Korea,” *Japan Economic Newswire*, 12 April 1995.

⁴⁸ Itō Takashi, interview by author, via email, 1 October 2022; “N. Korea Begins Assisting Own A-bomb Victims,” *Asian Political News*, 24 May 1999.

⁴⁹ Lee Sil-gun, interview, 12 December 2012.

due to the lack of diplomatic ties with North Korea, reflecting Tokyo's wariness toward setting legal precedents by paying colonial victims from government coffers. It was decided instead that Lee's organization and other concerned parties would shoulder the costs of the trip.⁵⁰ Nonaka confirmed in a press conference after the meeting that he was prepared to accept doctors from North Korea for radiology studies "to fulfil my duties from a humanitarian standpoint."⁵¹

Building on these developments, Lee Sil-gun's organization and its North Korean analogue co-convened an exhibition in Pyongyang in commemoration of the 49th anniversary of the atomic bombings. DPRK officials had initially approached Lee about this venture in 1997, a time when their nation was mired in a severe economic crisis and famine. The locus of legitimacy of the North Korean state had undergone a shift over the past few years to the Korean People's Army as the "supreme repository of power," accompanied by an emphasis on military strength, under the *songun* (military-first) doctrine. An exhibition displaying the nuclear levelling of medium-sized cities in a neighbouring country at the hands of an enemy of the state would have been intended to shore up internal support for the continued expenditure of scarce financial resources on the development of nuclear weapons—the ultimate expression of military power—at a time when much of the nation was starving. The images may also have been expected to evoke the incineration of North Korean cities during the Korean War. From Lee's perspective, the opportunity to impress upon North Korean officials the catastrophic consequences of nuclear weapons use in warfare could not be forsaken. Yet he encountered some resistance when he sought to loan the exhibition materials from the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, as per its peace education program. After repeated reassurances that the items would be returned, Lee was permitted to borrow 77 photos and posters depicting the devastation wrought by the A-bombs.⁵² The materials were exhibited in the Grand People's Study House in central Pyongyang from 13 to 18 August 1999, an achievement that Lee regarded among his most significant milestones as an anti-nuclear activist.⁵³ He became choked with emotion during an interview when reflecting on the hurdles he overcame to realize the event. "I was just so happy," he said through tears.⁵⁴ Among the attendees from Japan at the launch of the exhibition was Tsujimoto Kiyomi of the SDPJ, who appeared in a private capacity.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ "N. Korean Doctors to Attend Training for Bomb Victims," *Japan Economic Newswire*, 19 November 1999.

⁵¹ "Japan Backs Medical Care for N. Korean A-bomb Victims," *Japan Economic Newswire*, 3 March 1999.

⁵² Lee Sil-gun, interview, 12 December 2012.

⁵³ Lee Sil-gun, interview, 27 September 2013.

⁵⁴ Lee Sil-gun, interview, 27 September 2013.

⁵⁵ "Japan Activists, Lawmaker to Visit North Korea for A-Bomb Exhibit," Associated Press Newswires, 12 August 1999.

Bilateral momentum on the *pipokja* issue gained further traction as Tokyo and Pyongyang confirmed their approval of the proposed radiology delegation in November 1999. Seven North Koreans, including two radiologists and an A-bomb survivor, would travel to Japan the following year on the invitation of Lee's organization and Nakagawa Tomoko of the SDPJ.⁵⁶ The planned visit was realized in late February 2000 when North Korean delegates met with Prime Minister Obuchi Keizō and officials from Japan's foreign affairs and health and welfare ministries in Tokyo. The North Koreans implored Obuchi to provide urgent humanitarian assistance to the *pipokja* before they became too elderly, emphasizing that they were suffering from a variety of A-bomb related-diseases, including leukaemia and thyroid cancer.⁵⁷ Obuchi instructed the ministry officials present at the meeting to look further into the issue.⁵⁸ Prior to returning to the DPRK, the delegation called on the Hiroshima Red Cross Hospital and Atomic Bomb Survivors Hospital, where the visiting radiologists were familiarized with advanced medical equipment and educated in different techniques for treating various A-bomb-related illnesses. The *pipokja* delegate, meanwhile, was provided with a health assessment and medical treatment.⁵⁹

Shaping (and Being Shaped by) the Diplomatic Agenda

By the turn of the century, the activists had thoroughly undermined Tokyo's initial position that little could be done for A-bomb victims in North Korea in the absence of formal diplomatic relations. Through their sustained interaction with the *pipokja* in Pyongyang, they had demonstrated that diplomatic ties were not a necessary precursor to redress enactment. In the lead-up to its historic summit meeting with the Kim government, when the two governments were set to make another push toward normalization, Japanese officials became increasingly willing to incorporate the activists' redress objectives into the diplomatic agenda. However, as bilateral relations began to sharply deteriorate thereafter, the Japanese government was no longer inclined to engage with the activists or support their redress campaign. These circumstances lend support to Wiseman's contention that a state's responsiveness to non-state actor participation in the transnational policy dialogue will vary in accordance with the phase of the decision-making process.⁶⁰ Ultimately (and ironically), the authoritarian North Korean regime was more sustained in its engagement with the activists than its liberal democratic Japanese counterpart; this was reflective of the relative consistency

⁵⁶ "N. Korean Doctors to Attend Training for Bomb Victims," *Japan Economic Newswire*, 19 November 1999.

⁵⁷ "A-bomb Aid Eyed for Pyongyang," *Japan Times*, 24 December 2000.

⁵⁸ "A-bomb Aid Eyed for Pyongyang," *Japan Times*, 24 December 2000.

⁵⁹ "North Korean Team Tours A-bomb Museum," *Japan Times*, 4 March 2000.

⁶⁰ Wiseman, "Polylateralism," 37.

in the utility of the *pipokja* issue to Pyongyang's domestic and diplomatic policy agendas.

Signalling a complete reversal of its initial position on the matter of redress for the North Korean victims, the Japanese government began to give serious consideration to the development of an official redress scheme after the February 2000 meeting. A significant setback occurred two months later, however, when Obuchi Keizō suffered a heart attack and passed away. Lee was devastated by this loss and feared that the nascent redress policy for the A-bomb victims would be abandoned by Obuchi's successor, Mori Yoshirō, who was from a rival LDP faction. Yet it soon became apparent that Mori regarded this policy as a means to revive the stalled normalization talks with Pyongyang. His Cabinet confirmed its intention in December 2000 to send a delegation to North Korea early the following year to conduct a fact-finding investigation into the *pipokja* issue. This would serve as a prelude to the establishment of a four-billion-yen fund to cover the victims' medical costs.⁶¹ The mission was realized in March 2001 when Satō Shigekazu, the deputy director general of the foreign ministry's Asian and Oceania Affairs Bureau, led a delegation of Japanese doctors and foreign and health ministry officials to the DPRK. They ascertained that there were 928 surviving *pipokja* there and assessed their condition as "very severe."⁶²

The North Korean advocacy organization and the Japan-based activists took advantage of the forthcoming Tokyo-Pyongyang summit of September 2002 to press for further redress measures for the *pipokja*. Four months prior to the summit, Jon Jong-hyok, the secretary general of the Korean Atomic Bomb Victims Association for Anti-Nuclear Peace in the DPRK, relayed to Lee Sil-gun and lawyer-activist Takagi Kenichi that his organization was seeking Tokyo's financial support for the establishment of a specialized hospital for the North Korean victims.⁶³ A precedent had been set for this initiative in the early 1990s when the Japanese government contributed funds toward an analogous facility for the A-bomb victims in South Korea. Acting as intermediaries between the two governments, Lee and Takagi took up the proposal with the Northeast Asia Division of Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Yet in the context of growing domestic concerns about the abduction issue, which would be a focal agenda item at the impending summit, ministry officials were reluctant to endorse the plan; they cited apprehensions about the potential for the North Korean government to misappropriate the funds. Takagi later remarked on MOFA's position to the Japanese press: "If Japanese leaders use their connections with North Korea, there are measures that can

⁶¹ "A-bomb Aid Eyed for Pyongyang," *Japan Times*, 24 December 2000.

⁶² "928 atomic bomb survivors in N. Korea: reports," Agence-France Presse, 18 March 2001; H. Matusbara, John Feffer, and M. Tokita, "Japan's Korean Residents Caught in the Japan-North Korea Crossfire," *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 5, no. 1 (2007).

⁶³ "North Korean Group to Ask Japan to Help Build A-bomb Hospital," *BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific*, 4 May 2002.

be implemented immediately. As long as support is given in the form of a hospital, for example, it would be absurd to worry that it would be used for military purposes.”⁶⁴ Notwithstanding the foreign ministry’s hesitance toward the hospital proposal, the *pipokja* issue remained securely on the bilateral agenda. Japan’s Health Minister Sakaguchi Chikara affirmed in July 2002 that “[t]here is one remaining issue involving overseas atomic bombing survivors, and that is North Korea.”⁶⁵

On the occasion of the highly anticipated summit meeting of September 2002, however, Kim Jong-il delivered a stunning admission that would derail state-to-state bilateral progress on the *pipokja* issue for the foreseeable future. He confessed that North Korean special forces had abducted 13 Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s. While much has been written about the consequent “hijacking” of Tokyo’s North Korea policy by public opinion on the abduction issue, scholars have overlooked the implications of this political phenomenon for the North Korean victims. In short, the Japanese leadership’s plans for an official redress scheme for the *pipokja* were promptly abandoned in the wake of the abduction scandal and the surge of anti-North Korean sentiment it unleashed.⁶⁶ Extending “humanitarian” overtures to the North Korean A-bomb victims in this national milieu was no longer considered tenable; the issue had become a political liability for Tokyo both domestically and diplomatically. The activists consequently lost their leverage to negotiate redress concessions for the *pipokja* with Japanese officials.

Tokyo’s imperative of adopting a hardline stance vis-à-vis Pyongyang was further reinforced over the four years following the 2002 summit as Kim Jong-il traversed new technical thresholds in his missile program. The ruling LDP- Kōmeitō Party coalition tightened its sanctions regime against Pyongyang in response to these advancements, making it increasingly difficult for the activists to travel to North Korea.⁶⁷ Statements by Japanese officials signified a return to their original position on this issue even prior to Pyongyang’s nuclear test of 2006. Kōmeitō member Saitō Tetsuo, who headed a lawmakers’ group supporting overseas A-bomb survivors, described the atmosphere within this group as no longer conducive to discussing relief measures for the North Korean victims: “The health ministry seems to have no drive because there’s no guarantee that it can have access to individuals ... progress will be expected only after diplomatic ties are established.”⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Tanaka Miya, “Support Scarce for N. Korean Hibakusha,” *Japan Times*, 3 August 2006.

⁶⁵ Yamaguchi Mari, “North Koreans Abandoned in the Shadow of Hiroshima,” *Independent*, 7 August 2004.

⁶⁶ For an analysis of the Japanese media’s role in shaping this political phenomenon, see Hyung Gu Lynn, “Vicarious Traumas: Television and Public Opinion in Japan’s North Korea Policy,” *Pacific Affairs* 79, no. 3 (2006): 483–508.

⁶⁷ For a detailed assessment of Tokyo’s sanctions against Pyongyang, see Christopher W. Hughes, “The Political Economy of Japanese Sanctions Towards North Korea: Domestic Coalitions and International Systemic Pressures,” *Pacific Affairs* 79, no. 3 (2006): 455–481.

⁶⁸ Tanaka Miya, “Support Scarce for N. Korean Hibakusha,” *Japan Times*, 3 August 2006.

From the standpoint of the North Korean government, by contrast, redress for the *pipokja* issue was still an issue of national and diplomatic interest. This was despite the deterioration of its relations with Tokyo and the attainment of a long-coveted nuclear milestone: a successful nuclear test. Indeed, little had changed in terms of Pyongyang's aspirations for colonial reparations and its desire to legitimize its nuclear weapons program. The nature of the activists' engagement with the DPRK was, however, not unaffected by the developments in North Korea. The 2006 test of a nuclear device significantly raised the risks associated with their engagement with the victims in the DPRK. They also observed that the North Korean advocacy organization had removed the term "anti-nuclear peace" from its title following the nuclear test, signifying that it would no longer pursue redress measures for the victims from a rhetorical anti-nuclear stance; it would do so henceforth on the basis of nuclear deterrence logic. While Japanese photo journalist Itō Takashi was filming his documentary, *Hiroshima-Pyongyang: The Discarded A-Bomb Victims*, in North Korea, he noted that the *pipokja* had shifted their stance in accordance with their advocacy organization. While previously they had conveyed to him that they were opposed to the development of nuclear weapons, in response to his questioning about the 2006 nuclear test by their government, they asserted that such weapons "are a necessary evil to defend us from attacks by the United States."⁶⁹ Despite this discursive shift, the Pyongyang-based advocacy organization continued to invite the activists in Japan to conduct fact-finding missions in North Korea. The most recent mission was led by Kaneko Tetsuo of Gensuikin (formerly a member of the Japanese Diet) in 2018, the results of which revealed that among 111 A-bomb victims surveyed that year in North Korea, 51 had passed away and only 60 were still alive (see table 1 below). Lee Sil-gun, for his part, persisted in urging Japanese officials to provide financial support to the *pipokja* up until his death in Hiroshima in 2020, at age 90.

Conclusion

For the Allied powers, the dropping of the atomic bombs heralded the end of World War II. Yet for those who were exposed to such bombs and managed to survive the ordeal, a new battle had just begun. Atomic irradiation took a devastating toll on the livelihoods of the victims, leaving them with little recourse but to turn to the state for financial and medical support. The process of redress that ensued had a fractured temporality that played out across the newly defined geopolitical boundaries of Northeast Asia. Survivors who remained within the former imperial metropole were best placed to elicit state support; they had a direct channel of influence to the target state,

⁶⁹ Itō Takashi, interview, via email, 1 October 2022.

Table 1
Aggregated fact-finding survey results for numbers of
*A-bomb victims in North Korea*⁷⁰

Capital city and provinces in North Korea	Total number of confirmed A-bomb victims	Total number of living A-bomb victims in 2008	Number of A-bomb victims surveyed in 2018	Number of living victims from the 2018 survey	Number of deceased victims from the 2018 survey
Pyongyang	128	23	17	14	3
Kangwon	341	31	6	3	3
Ryanggang	20	10	7	2	5
Chagang	20	2	Non-reported	Non-reported	Non-reported
South Pyongan	340	68	24	11	13
North Pyongan	166	26	14	7	7
South Hamgyong	269	62	19	7	2
North Hamgyong	166	50	Non-reported	Non-reported	Non-reported
South Hwanghae	390	69	20	9	11
North Hwanghae	71	41	14	7	7
Total	1911	382	111	60	51

Source: Document created by Kaneko Tetsuo, “Zaichō hibakusha no genjō to kadai” [Current status and issues of North Korean A-bomb victims], 4 April 2019.

Tokyo, and were able to leverage this once the Allied Occupation of Japan came to an end. From the dropping of the A-bombs, it took approximately 12 to 20 years—depending on their nationality—for victims in this category to become qualified to apply for redress.

For those who departed from the imperial metropole after Japan’s defeat, however, the pursuit of redress would be a far more protracted and fraught

⁷⁰ This survey data was provided to the author by Kaneko Tetsuo of Gensuikin. It represents the aggregated results of fact-finding surveys conducted by the North Korean advocacy organization and the Japan-based activists over several years. The table was translated and arranged in chronological order by the author. Kaneko Tetsuo, interview, via email, 8 November 2022.

undertaking. This category of victims was dominated by ethnic Koreans who had been shuffled about geographically like pawns on a chessboard by the hand of power as the Japanese empire rose and fell. Those whose final move positioned them south of the 38th parallel were compelled to endure a five-to six-decade-long battle against their erstwhile colonial overlord to become eligible to claim redress. Those whose final move positioned them north of the 38th parallel—retrospectively, the wrong side of the Bamboo Curtain—were altogether elided from the A-bomb victim hierarchy and left without recourse to the relief law. They found themselves in a geopolitical blind spot in the post-imperial regional order.

Activists who mobilized in support of repatriated Korean colonial-era victims and their quest for redress developed pressure strategies in accordance with the contrasting political opportunity structures on either side of the 38th parallel. Their modes of activism were thus in many ways diametrically opposed. The authoritarian nature of the DPRK regime and the absence of formal diplomatic ties between Pyongyang and Tokyo posed formidable hurdles to those advocating for the *pipokja* in North Korea. Lee Sil-gun was uniquely positioned to navigate these obstacles and forge a diplomatic pathway with the North Korean state. He was an ethnic Korean A-bomb survivor who had remained within the imperial metropole and had assumed North Korea-affiliated domicile status by default; he was also a politically savvy activist with fluency in Korean and Japanese. This set of attributes enabled Lee to manoeuvre across the cultural, political, and linguistic boundaries between North Korea and Japan with greater agility and fewer constraints than an official diplomat. He successfully capitalized on the Kim government's interest in his anti-imperialist credentials to establish a durable communication channel with the regime and promote his agenda of addressing the plight of the *pipokja*. Rather than confronting Tokyo and Pyongyang through a protest-oriented approach, Lee and his fellow activists established complementary relations with them. Their ability to elicit concessions was contingent on the degree of convergence between their redress objectives and the national and diplomatic interests of the two governments. Pyongyang was ultimately more forthcoming with concessions than Tokyo, reflecting the differential degree of their respective convergence of interests.

The trajectory of the North Korean A-bomb victim issue also casts light on the increasingly apparent phenomenon of non-state actors crafting roles for themselves as agents in the diplomatic arena. As articulated by Yolanda Spies, “the practice of diplomacy, which was traditionally reserved for the executive branch of government and professional diplomats, has thus become a polyilateral activity.”⁷¹ The case examined in this article provides evidence

⁷¹ Y. Kemp Spies, “Whither Professional Diplomacy,” *Politeia* 25, no. 3 (2006): 304.

that even non-democracies like North Korea are disposed toward polyilateral innovation when formal diplomatic approaches are limited or failing. It further illustrates that bilateral progress was made on the issue despite the divergent “low politics” appeal of the activists’ framing of the plight of the *pipokja* to Japanese officials and its “high politics” attractiveness to North Korean officials. Lastly, the case reaffirms Wiseman’s proposition that a state’s inclination toward polyilateral engagement with non-state actors is shaped by the phase of the decision-making process.

Australian National University, Australia, December 2022