Seven people believed to be North Koreans have entered a Japanese school in Beijing seeking refuge. The incident comes as Japanese relations with both North Korea and China are worsening.

Japanese Embassy spokesman Keiji Ide says security cameras at the school alerted embassy personnel to the break-in just before 4:00 a.m. Friday local time. "It seems to us they are from North Korea," he stated. "We decided to bring them to the embassy building. Six of them are adults and one is a small child, two men and four women."

Mr. Ide says there are now 16 North Koreans taking refuge in the Japanese compound.

In the past two years, scores of North Koreans have rushed diplomatic compounds in Beijing and other Chinese cities, hoping for asylum and transit to another country—usually South Korea. There are reportedly tens of thousands more North Koreans hiding throughout China, fleeing hunger and political repression in their communist homeland.

Beijing, North Korea's closest ally, refuses to grant the Koreans refugee status, and has objected to international support for those within its borders.

Friday's asylum bid may strain Japan's already frayed relations with both China and North Korea.

Tokyo is engaged in a heated dispute with Pyongyang over North Korea's program of kidnapping Japanese during the Cold War. The North Koreans say eight of the 13 Japanese they admit to abducting have since died. Pyongyang has handed over human remains it said belonged to two of the abductees, but last week Tokyo said forensic analysis had revealed that the remains belonged to other people.

The Japanese government is now under mounting public pressure to impose economic sanctions on Pyongyang. Pyongyang has replied by saying this would amount to a declaration of war.

And at the same time, Tokyo's relations with Beijing have been tested by a series of disputes over maritime borders, and the issuance of a visitor's visa to a former Taiwanese president.
Shiela Smith, a political analyst with the East-West Center in Hawaii, says the diplomatic tensions reflect Japanese unease with China's growing regional influence. "The Japanese are beginning to think through the rise of Chinese power, the implicit contention between Japan and China over the leadership role in the Asia-Pacific," she said.

Last week Japan said it would start to treat China, along with North Korea, as a potential national security threat, and began reorienting its military defenses accordingly.

These disputes come as Japan and China, together with the United States, Russia and South Korea, are pressing North Korea to rejoin talks aimed at ending the North's nuclear weapons program.

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