

Koizumi's visit to North Korea: a first for Japanese imperialism

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Junichiro Koizumi is due to make the first ever trip by a Japanese Prime Minister to Pyongyang, where he will hold a one-day summit on September 17 with North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il. The Japanese media has hailed the visit as something of a political coup. With the backing of the Bush administration, it appears that Tokyo, rather than Washington, will now take a leading role in pressing their mutual demands on the North Korea regime.

Informal contact is believed to have taken place for over a year between North Korean officials and former Japanese prime minister Yoshiro Mori—one of Koizumi's closest factional allies within Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). By late August, a tentative agreement had been reached and Koizumi publicly declared his desire for talks with Kim Jong-Il. A formal invitation was extended by North Korea and accepted by Tokyo on August 30, after prior talks with the United States, South Korea, China and Russia.

Statements in the US indicate that the White House has been fully briefed at every stage of the Japanese government's decision-making and is confident that Koizumi will represent its interests. The Bush administration welcomed the visit, saying it had no need to send its own diplomatic mission to Pyongyang until it assessed the outcome of the negotiations with Japan.

An unnamed US official told the *Yomiuri Shimbun*: "Japan knows very well the matters that Washington is concerned about, so the Tokyo-Pyongyang summit meeting should reflect US concerns." Koizumi arrived in the US yesterday to take part in the commemorations of last year's terror attacks, and immediately entered into discussions over Iraq, Korea and economic issues.

The North Korean regime's motives in seeking the summit with Koizumi are transparent. It is making a desperate gamble that the talks with Japan will facilitate negotiations with the US and ease the country's economic and political isolation. Earlier in the year, Bush branded North Korea, along with Iraq and Iran, as a part of an "axis of evil" and has been steadily increasing its belligerent rhetoric against Pyongyang. Just days before the announcement of Koizumi's visit, Undersecretary of State John Bolton declared in South Korea: "In addition to its disturbing weapons of mass destruction activities, North Korea also is the world's foremost peddler of ballistic missile-related equipment, components, materials and technical expertise."

Washington's aggressive stance against North Korea, including the possibility of US military strikes against alleged weapons

facilities, has effectively sabotaged South Korea's "Sunshine Policy" to open up the North Korean economy and make the Korean peninsula a hub for economic activity between Europe and East Asia. Plans for railway links, gas pipelines and industrial export zones have stalled.

North Korea is on the brink of economic and social disintegration. According to most analysts, less than 30 percent of industry is functioning and one third of the population rely on international food aid to avoid starvation. This disastrous state is the outcome of the reactionary and autarkic policies of the Stalinist regime in Pyongyang, combined with the isolation and pressure maintained by Washington since the Korean War of 1950-53. In the decade since collapse of the Soviet Union—North Korea's chief sponsor and financier—the US has stepped up its provocations.

Successive allegations have been used to justify economic sanctions, deny aid, block a political settlement between the North and the South and keep the peninsula in a state of military alert and fear. Every attempt by Pyongyang to accommodate to Washington's demands has been met by new ultimatums. In 1994, the US accused North Korea of using its two nuclear power plants to gather weapons-grade plutonium. Pyongyang agreed to close them down and allowed International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors into the country, who found no evidence of a nuclear weapons program. The major powers have reneged on their side of the agreement, however, which was to construct two replacement light-water nuclear plants by 2003. Construction did not even begin until this year and is not due to be finished until at least 2009.

In 1998, the Clinton administration declared that North Korea was developing missiles capable of striking Japan and the US West Coast. Faced with US ultimatums, North Korea again backed down and suspended work on its longest-range missile until 2003. Following a review of US policy towards North Korea, the Bush administration ratcheted up the pressure, with fresh accusations that North Korea was constructing weapons of mass destruction.

Koizumi's agenda in Pyongyang leaves no reason to believe that the talks represent any departure from the decade-long policy of isolating North Korea. What is significant is that for the first time Washington appears to be permitting Tokyo to play a larger diplomatic and potentially military role in East Asia by aggressively pursuing the Pyongyang regime.

At the top of the list are demands that North Korea permanently suspend its long-range missile program and once again allow

IAEA inspectors into its former nuclear facilities. Any refusal to do so will be seized on immediately in Washington and Tokyo as evidence that their accusations against North Korea are legitimate and, if need be, as a pretext for military confrontation. A Japanese Korean affairs commentator, Masao Okonogi, warned in the Chinese *Peoples Daily* that if the September 17 summit ended with no visible progress, “then Japan will join with the US to contain the DPRK (North Korea). The DPRK will face higher risks.”

Even if Pyongyang does agree to these demands, new ones are sure to follow. As in the case of Iraq, North Korea faces the impossible task of proving that nowhere on its territory does it have the potential to develop “weapons of mass destruction”.

Layers of the US and Japanese ruling classes have been determined to bring about the collapse of the North Korean regime since the end of the Cold War. Whatever concessions Pyongyang makes, the administrations in Washington and Tokyo regard it as an obstacle to their ambitions for domination over the markets and resources of North East Asia, particularly in China and the Russian Far East. An aggressive stance will also undermine efforts by the European powers to open up diplomatic and economic relations in North Korea as part of their wider thrust into the region.

The clearest signal that Koizumi’s visit will not lead to a lessening of tensions is the prominence being given to longstanding but unsubstantiated allegations that North Korean agents kidnapped at least 11 Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s. The Japanese political establishment is insisting that Koizumi put pressure on North Korea to “resolve” the issue.

Initially confined to Japan’s ultra right-wing fringe, the accusation was taken up by the Japanese government in 1997, after a North Korean defector claimed to have details of the abductions. According to the defector, the 11 were taken for the purpose of training North Korean spies in Japanese language and culture. Despite an absence of credible evidence, North Korea’s refusal in 1998 to investigate the defectors’ allegation became the basis for the Japanese government calling off talks over the establishment of diplomatic relations with Pyongyang. Unofficial talks also broke down in October 2000.

Bizarre as the allegations appear, the Japanese ruling elite has important ideological issues at stake. After 1945, Japanese imperialism was compelled to accept responsibility for the Pacific war and, outwardly at least, adopt a stance of contrition and humility. Japan is still labelled a former enemy in the United Nations charter and its constitution prohibits the country from using force to settle international disputes. To re-establish relations with its former colonies of South Korea and China, Japan had to issue apologies and compensation.

The extreme right gave voice to the continuing resentment in ruling circles over this legacy of Japan’s defeat in World War II. According to their propaganda, Japan was rendered so impotent by the terms of its wartime surrender that even North Korea felt confident to intrude into Japanese territory and kidnap its citizens with impunity.

The fact that the Koizumi government has adopted the issue is a clear sign that the ruling class is determined to end its post-war posture and more aggressively pursue its interests, particularly in North East Asia. The abductions have already been used to justify

bellicose actions by the Japanese military. Last December, the Japanese Coast Guard sunk an unidentified ship, claiming it was a North Korean spy ship.

The allegations have also become a means of stoking up Japanese nationalism and harnessing public support for a confrontational policy against North Korea. The campaign has had such an impact that 48 percent of Japanese named the abductions as the “highest priority issue” between Japan and North Korea—far outranking “weapons of mass destruction”. One LDP politician went as far as to declare he would only consider Koizumi’s trip a success “when he comes back to Japan from Pyongyang with the 11 abductees on his chartered plane”.

Koizumi’s staff have foreshadowed that he will give some type of apology to North Korea for the “damage and suffering” inflicted on the Korean people during Japan’s rule of the peninsula—similar to one he gave to South Korea last year. But the reestablishment of diplomatic ties and any Japanese compensation will be predicated on Pyongyang kowtowing to Tokyo over the abduction charges and pledging to cease its alleged violations of Japanese sovereignty.

As with “weapons of mass destruction,” the abduction issue puts the North Korean regime into an impossible situation. If Pyongyang continues to maintain that the charges are fabrications, Koizumi is likely to reject diplomatic relations and adopt a more aggressive stance towards North Korea. If it admits in any way to the charges, North Korea faces an inexhaustible series of demands—from calls for apologies and compensation to demands for the return of Japanese citizens and investigations into other alleged victims. The logical conclusion was spelt out by right-wing Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara in April, when he asserted Japan should declare war on North Korea over the issue.

Whatever the immediate outcome of Koizumi’s visit, it is part of a bid by Japan to reassert itself as a political and military power, adding a new and explosive element to an already volatile situation in the Asia Pacific region.



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