

# Pyongyang summit: North Korean prostration answered with more Japanese demands

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The September 17 summit between Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il in Pyongyang marks a significant step in the reassertion of Japan as a political and military power in Asia. Exploiting the desperation and political bankruptcy of North Korea's Stalinist regime, Koizumi demanded and received Kim's submission to a series of provocative demands from both Washington and Tokyo.

The most publicised issue was Kim Jong-Il's admission that North Korean agents had abducted Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s. He informed Koizumi that a total of 13 Japanese had been kidnapped between 1977 and 1983 to teach North Korean spies Japanese language and culture and to use their identities for its agents to enter South Korea.

The abductees include 10 people who were on a long-standing Japanese list of 11—North Korea denied any knowledge of the last individual—plus three others who were not classified as abduction victims by Tokyo. In answer to questions on the fate of the 13, Kim notified Tokyo that eight were dead and that five were still alive in North Korea. Japanese diplomats met with four of the alleged abductees and claim to have verified their identities.

Kim Jong-Il formally apologised for the abductions, declaring they had been carried out by over-zealous agents who were subsequently punished. Japan was informed that the deaths resulted from disease or natural disasters. The joint declaration from the talks refers to the abductions only indirectly, as “regrettable things, a product of the abnormal relations between North Korea and Japan”.

While the world press described the confession as “unbelievable” to “stunning”, it downplayed the fact that Koizumi went into the summit with an ultimatum—admit to the abductions or there would be no further talks. North Korea had always categorically denied the abductions since they were first tentatively raised by the Japanese government in 1991. Its about face is testimony to the desperate economic and political impasse it has reached.

Kim Jong-Il speaks for a reactionary bureaucratic caste, which is presiding over a society on the verge of collapse due to both its own autarkic policies and decades of sustained pressure by the US and other major powers. Both Washington and Tokyo made clear that the summit was North Korea's last chance to end its isolation. Koizumi went to Pyongyang with Bush's support and the implicit understanding that if North Korea failed to measure up there was no possibility of talks with the US or of ending American military threats.

Kim Jong-Il not only bowed to Japanese demands on the abductees but made sweeping concessions on other issues. He declared North

Korea's willingness to meet US demands to permit International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors to enter the country's defunct nuclear reactors and research facilities to verify it was not constructing “weapons of mass destruction”. He also agreed to extend its 1998 moratorium on long-range missile testing indefinitely.

To further appease Japan, Kim Jong-Il admitted that North Korea had deployed spy ships into Japanese waters, apologised and pledged it would not do so again. Last December, the Japanese Coast Guard pursued and sunk an alleged spy boat. Japan raised the vessel shortly before the summit and has now officially classified it, without further evidence, as “North Korean” on the strength of Kim's statement.

Completing the prostration, North Korea abandoned its longstanding demand for compensation for Japanese imperialism's 35-year brutal colonial rule of the Korean peninsula from 1910 to 1945. Instead, Kim Jong-Il accepted a token verbal apology for the “huge damage and suffering” inflicted on the Korean people—an identical statement to the one Koizumi made in South Korea last year—and a vague commitment from Japan to “earnestly discuss the specific scope and content of economic cooperation” as part of future talks on establishing diplomatic relations.

The fact that Kim Jong-Il agreed to the list of US and Japanese demands was never going to satisfy either Washington or Tokyo. Throughout the 1990s, the Clinton administration used accusations that North Korea was constructing “weapons of mass destruction” to bully Pyongyang and to maintain the country's isolation, even as its economy crumbled and up to two million people starved to death. The Bush administration includes right-wing figures like Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, who denounced Clinton for not being aggressive enough on North Korea and advocated a strategy designed to precipitate its political and social collapse.

While the US and Japan maintained intense pressure upon Pyongyang, China, backed by the European Union (EU), utilised its influence to encourage a rapprochement between North and South Korea. At the inter-Korea summit in June 2000, an agreement was reached to indefinitely maintain the political division of the peninsula but open up the North economically as a source of cheap labour and a hub for trade between East Asia and the EU.

The Bush administration has made clear, however, that it intends to block any attempt to undermine US predominance in East Asia as elsewhere. Any settlement on the Korean peninsula would remove the main rationale for the presence of US troops in South Korea and Japan, while strengthening the influence of China, Russia and the European powers. Since assuming power, Bush cut across any deal

between the Koreans by assuming a far more aggressive posture towards the North. In January, he named North Korea as part of the “axis of evil” along with Iraq and Iran.

Within the Japanese establishment and even within Koizumi’s cabinet, there are sharp divisions over whether to support the Bush administration’s foreign policy or not. But to the extent that US policies can be exploited to realise the long-held perspective of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to revive Japan as a military power, Koizumi has succeeded in aligning Tokyo with Washington. Just as in the US, sections of the Japanese ruling elite are preparing for their own military adventures as a means of diverting from growing social tensions at home and to further Japanese commercial ambitions abroad.

Within this context, the issue of the North Korean abductees, which has long been the hobby horse of the extreme rightwing in Japan, is a convenient political device. Whatever may or may not have happened to the individuals involved, neither Koizumi nor other political figures are concerned about their fate. The accusations are aimed at whipping up anti-Korean sentiment and Japanese chauvinism, and, in the name of self-defence, justifying a more aggressive military posture against North Korea and throughout the region.

Like allegations concerning “weapons of mass destruction”, the issue opens up a Pandora’s box of Japanese demands, which North Korea can never lay to rest. Koizumi himself is walking a fine line. The Japanese press is already denouncing previous governments for failing to make the fate of the abductees a matter of official concern prior to 1998.

The September 19 editorial of the *Yomiuri Shimbun*—Japan’s largest circulation daily—entitled “Stop toadying to North Korea”, declared: “It is a nation’s obligation to prevent infringement on its sovereignty and protect the lives of its people. But the government’s toadyish diplomacy, which overlooked the key issue affecting its relations with North Korea, led to a delay in resolving the abduction cases and resulted in tragic consequences. This sycophantic tendency among diplomats and lawmakers must be erased when the government resumes normalisation talks with North Korea...”

The call to end “toadyish diplomacy” carries definite implications. The *Yomiuri Shimbun* has been a mouthpiece for those in Japanese ruling circles who have been demanding an end to what they regard as the apologetic stance adopted by governments following World War II towards the crimes of Japanese imperialism in the 1930s and 1940s. The newspaper has also been in the forefront of those arguing for constitutional changes to abolish the pacifist clause that inhibits the development and overseas deployment of the country’s military.

The media is already raising a string of new demands against Pyongyang including: the return of all surviving abductees; a full investigation into the circumstances of the eight deaths; the extradition for trial in Japan of the North Korean agents responsible; investigations into at least another 40 cases of alleged abduction; and financial compensation by North Korea to the surviving abductees and the families of the deceased. The emotion being whipped up around the issue is highlighted by a *Yomiuri Shimbun* opinion poll, which recorded 90 percent support for Koizumi demanding the full resolution of the abductions issue before any discussions on diplomatic relations.

Koizumi is both responding to and encouraging the frenzy. Whether new demands over the abductions are made the precondition or the agenda for talks, it is clear that North Korea’s concessions on September 17 have been dismissed in Tokyo as insufficient. The

prospect of a complete breakdown in relations is already looming. Pyongyang has denied any knowledge of 40 other alleged abductions and refused to allow Japanese police forensic experts to enter North Korea on the weekend to begin independent investigations.

The entire official political establishment in Japan is rallying behind calls for increased pressure on North Korea. The Japanese Communist Party (JCP), which for decades has glorified the North Korean Stalinist regime, has declared full support for Koizumi’s actions at the summit. JCP leader Kazuo Shii denounced North Korea’s “international crimes” on September 18 and called for a second round of talks with Pyongyang to focus on “the whole truth concerning the abductions, the punishment of those who were responsible for the acts, and apology to and compensation for the victims”.

The main opposition Democratic Party has publicly opposed even holding a second round of talks, as has the right-wing Liberal Party of Ichiro Ozawa. The ultra-nationalist mayor of Tokyo, Shintaro Ishihara, ordered the flags at the city hall lowered to half-mast on September 20 as an official protest against the national government. He told a press conference: “I’m demonstrating my determination to bury the kind of the diplomacy practiced by Japan in the past... they [Koizumi and his staff] should have had the text of the declaration revised in a way the public could accept.” Ishihara is on record as advocating war against North Korea if the abducted Japanese are not returned.

For its part, the US administration has already signalled that its policy toward North Korea has not altered. The National Security Strategy document released on September 20 labels it as a “rogue state” and “the world’s principal purveyor of ballistic missiles”. On September 27, it announced James Kelly, the US assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, would visit Pyongyang on October 3. While the North Korean regime has announced the establishment of a special economic zone and appealed for investment, White House press secretary Ari Fleischer indicated that the US is considering new demands, including for changes to the North Korean political system.

Far from laying the basis for Pyongyang’s rapprochement with Tokyo and Washington, the concessions made by North Korea on September 17 have become the launching pad for a new round of provocations, with Japan set to play an increasingly prominent role.



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