

# Japanese officials secretly visit North Korea

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In a move that apparently surprised its allies—the US and South Korea—Japan recently sent a secret delegation to North Korea.

Leading the visit, Isao Iijima, an advisor to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, landed in Pyongyang on May 14, departing three days later. During his visit, he met with senior leaders of the North Korean regime including Kim Yong-nam, the president of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly.

While Iijima's visit was intended to be conducted in secret, North Korea revealed his presence from the beginning. According to the *Japan Times*, a government source stated that it could not “reasonably explain” the visit. Abe himself refused to discuss it at a Diet budget committee meeting on May 15, and the government indicated that it had “no comment”.

South Korean media speculated that Iijima's mission aims to pave the way for Abe to visit Pyongyang in late May or early June.

On May 15, Abe declared that he is “open” to a summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, ostensibly to discuss the return of Japanese people kidnapped by North Korea, as well as North Korea's nuclear program.

Since then, Abe has promoted the trip to secure the release of Japanese citizens abducted in the 1970s and 1980s by North Korea in order to train spy operatives in Japan. The claim that the trip was about the Japanese abductees—whose fates are exploited in Japan to stoke nationalism—aimed to provide Abe with a politically palatable pretext for Iijima's visit.

Upon his return, however, Iijima declared, “I will not speak to any media.”

Significantly, Tokyo failed to notify either the United States or South Korea, prompting protests from both. In the past decade, the three countries have acted together against North Korea, particularly over its nuclear programs.

South Korean Foreign Ministry Spokesman Cho Tae-young stated bluntly, “We don't think Isao Iijima's visit to North Korea was helpful.”

The United States took a more tactful tone. Glyn Davies, the US special representative on North Korean policy, stated, “We all have fundamental security interests in dealing with North Korea ... it is important that we stay connected very closely.” He claimed that it would take days to learn the nature of the Japanese government's mission to Pyongyang.

While the exact intentions of the Japanese government remain murky, what is clear is that all of the major powers are jockeying for influence in this strategic region. The Japanese daily *Asahi Shimbun* wrote, “Japan has felt left out as the United States, China and South Korea take the lead in trying to confront Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions.”

There are constant rumors of the possible collapse of the North Korean regime. A February 2010 cable released by WikiLeaks revealed comments by then-South Korean Vice-Foreign Minister Chun Yung-woo, who predicted the collapse of North Korea following Kim Jong-il's death. The cable reads, “The DPRK [North Korea], Chun said, had already collapsed economically; following the death of KJI (Kim Jong-il), North Korea would collapse politically in ‘two to three years.’” Kim Jong-il died in December 2011.

Serious divisions have emerged between China and North Korea, whose attempts to develop nuclear weapons have been denounced by Washington, which seized upon them to build up its own military posture in the region—a move primarily directed at Beijing.

North Korea sent a high-level envoy to Beijing on Wednesday, Choe Ryong-hae, the director of the General Political Bureau of the North Korean army, in an attempt to patch up ties with China, its only major ally. Following Pyongyang's nuclear test in February, China supported Washington at the UN in imposing

more sanctions on North Korea. Major Chinese banks have also been ordered to freeze accounts with North Korea's Foreign Trade Bank in the beginning of May, to support US-led sanctions on North Korean financial institutions.

An article in German-based *Deutsche Welle* on May 15, reported that China was making plans to put Kim Jong-un's older brother, Kim Jong-nam, in power.

"Intelligence sources have passed on to DW information that Beijing has a contingency plan in place for when Kim Jong-un's control over the country crumbles," DW said. The younger Kim would be permitted to live in exile, possibly in China, after "regime change", according to the plans.

The European powers' interest in North Korea was also underscored by a report in January by the German *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* that North Korea was consulting with German economists on how to re-integrate the country into world capitalism.

The North Korean Stalinist bureaucracy would gladly offer itself as a new cheap labor platform to world imperialism, having already built export-processing zones in several locations in North Korea. On tour in Burma last September, US President Barack Obama suggested that Washington might consider building up relations with North Korea, offering an "extended hand" from the United States if North Korea abandoned its nuclear weapons.

These openings have always foundered, however, on the complex and bitter geo-strategic antagonisms between the major powers that are involved. Abe's secret delegation to Pyongyang is another sign that Japanese imperialism is moving to assert its interests as the United States pushes Japan to play a more aggressive role in the region, as part of the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" to encircle China.



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