

Tokyo wary of dialogue with North Korea

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A potential summit between North Korea and the United States has revealed cracks in the US-Japan alliance. The government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Tokyo is viewing the prospect of dialogue with Pyongyang apprehensively, fearing being sidelined if any deals are actually struck.

Washington had seemingly seen eye-to-eye with Tokyo on rejecting talks with Pyongyang, but US President Donald Trump's sudden about-face reveals differences between the two, as well as further demonstrating Washington's willingness to prosecute its interests alone, regardless of its alliances.

The Trump administration did not coordinate with Tokyo before announcing earlier this month it had agreed to talks with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. Abe had opposed any talks with the North, even warning South Korean President Moon Jae-in in February: "North Korea continues to develop its nuclear weapons and long-range missiles. [We should] be careful about North Korea's charm offensive."

A senior Japanese government official told the *Diplomat* that Tokyo fears any potential reduction in US military commitment in the region that could result from an agreement. "In that case, Japan would lose the crucial buffer against not only North Korea but also China, and expose itself directly to the security threat surrounding Japan," the official said. The Japanese government claims that even if Pyongyang agrees to abandon its intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) program, Japan would still be at risk from the North's shorter-range missiles.

A US military pull-back is highly unlikely given Washington's new National Defense Strategy, unveiled in January, which targets China and Russia as the main US military targets. Tokyo's concerns reveal the differing imperialist interests of the two allies and expose the claims that they are working to stop the supposed North Korean threat.

Another senior Japanese government official told the *Diplomat*: "I believe that the US-Japan alliance is being tested more than ever since the end of World War II. It is very difficult to anticipate if the [North Korean] crisis will end with dialogue or military options, but I can say that Japanese people will carefully examine the results of the crisis [and ask] whether we should have maintained the alliance with the US for about 70 years or not."

North Korea's nuclear and missile programs have been the pretext for Tokyo's push to remilitarise, including by revising Article 9 of its constitution, which bans a standing army and the ability to deploy it overseas. An agreement between Washington and Pyongyang, while highly unlikely, would cut across Tokyo's justification for rearming. Japan would continue its military buildup for its own imperialist purposes, and further expose the fact that it is targeting China, as is Washington, and not the impoverished North Korea.

Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera stated at the ministry's annual symposium on March 19: "We're expecting a possible inter-Korean summit and a US-North Korea summit. But at this point I think it's important that we remain cautious about North Korea." He demanded the "complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantling of [Pyongyang's] nuclear and missile development."

Foreign Minister Taro Kono recently met US officials in Washington, including Defense Secretary James Mattis and CIA Director and secretary of state nominee Mike Pompeo, and laid out several preconditions North Korea had to meet prior to dialogue with the US. These included promises for a complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization, International Atomic Energy Agency inspections of nuclear facilities, and the abolition of chemical weapons.

Despite emerging differences, Kono stated he

believes “the US and Japan are in sync for this North Korea issue.” As a sign of Tokyo’s concerns, however, Abe will meet Trump for a summit in April, a month before the possible Trump-Kim meeting.

After recent talks between US, South Korean and Japanese officials, the White House said the three countries would continue coordinating closely while “avoiding mistakes of the past.” That was a reference to North Korea’s supposed failure to live up to previous agreements that were, in fact, scuttled by Washington.

There is no guarantee the May summit between Trump and Kim will take place. Tokyo’s preconditions could create the justification for calling off the summit, with Washington and Tokyo placing the blame on Pyongyang and generating additional justifications for war.

Nonetheless, in response to the upcoming talks, Tokyo is now seeking its own summit with Pyongyang. “Abe was blindsided by Trump’s sudden swerve towards talks,” Jeffery Kingston, director of Asian studies at Temple University in Tokyo, told Britain’s *Telegraph* newspaper.

Kingston continued: “This is about face-saving and trying to make sure Japan has a voice in the talks because the great concern is that Trump will cut a deal that doesn’t address Japan’s concerns.”

If Abe-Kim talks do take place, they would be after the summit between Trump and Kim. They would be the first in 14 years since Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi met with Kim Jong-il and would likely focus on the abductions of Japanese citizens by North Korea in the 1970s and 1980s. Right-wing Japanese nationalists often use the issue to whip up anti-North Korean sentiment.

Tokyo wants Kim Jong-un’s regime to implement the Japan-North Korea Pyongyang Declaration dealing with normalizing relations, agreed to in 2002 when Koizumi first met with Kim Jong-il. The Abe government claims this would bring economic benefits to the North.

In fact, this reveals another point of contention between the US, Japan and South Korea: which side will reap the economic rewards of North Korea’s subjugation? In the past, Pyongyang has offered up its highly exploited working class as a source of ultra-cheap labour, notably at the Kaesong Industrial

Complex and the Rason Special Economic Zone.

A new carving up of East Asia is taking place. The underlying geopolitical and economic tensions that led to war and colonization in the region in the 19th and 20th centuries are reemerging. In the unlikely event that an agreement is reached with North Korea, it would only be a prelude to a future crisis and conflict as the major powers compete for domination in the region.



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