

Japanese prime minister pushing for summit with North Korean leader

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Amid growing international turmoil and domestic instability, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida is seeking a summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. The move comes as Kishida's approval rating has fallen due to a scandal in his ruling party and rising tensions on the Korean Peninsula fueled by the US-led war drive aimed at China.

Speaking to the National Diet on February 9, Kishida stated that Tokyo was making “various, concrete” efforts to realize a summit with Kim. He told parliament, “I have to refrain from going into details, but I am constantly working [on North Korea] through various channels.” The possibility of talks opened following the January 1 Noto Earthquake when Kim sent a rare message of sympathy to Japan.

Ostensibly, Tokyo wants to hold a summit in order to resolve the issue of North Korea's abduction of Japanese citizens between 1977 and 1983. The Japanese government has officially recognized 17 abductees or suspected abductees, although there may be more. They were kidnapped supposedly to teach Japanese language and culture to spies or as wives for foreign defectors living in the North. Five were allowed to return to Japan in 2002 following a summit between Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and Kim Jong Il, Kim Jong Un's father. Pyongyang states that eight others have passed away and four were never abducted.

The *Financial Times* (FT) reported on Tuesday that different discussions between Tokyo and Pyongyang have taken place, including through a channel in Beijing, as the two countries do not have formal diplomatic relations. However, while Kishida pushes for some tangible results on the abduction issue, the Kim regime has supposedly refused to address it.

Tokyo had reportedly not informed the US about its talks with Pyongyang, according to the FT. So far,

Washington has avoided public comments that would expose any cracks in the de facto trilateral military alliance between the US, Japan, and South Korea that the three have built following the Camp David war summit last August.

However, Christopher Johnstone, a former CIA official and Japan analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, which has close connections to the US state, called the talks between Tokyo and Pyongyang a “fraught exercise.” In an implied rebuke to Tokyo, he added, “Transparency in advance with both Washington and Seoul will be critical—particularly about any incentives Japan may consider to bring North Korea to the table.”

Whatever tensions are taking place behind the scenes, there are growing concerns in Tokyo about the likelihood of another Trump administration coming to power in the US, especially given the sharp fall in support for President Joe Biden. That is in no small part due to Biden's support for Israel's genocide in Gaza.

Based on interviews with six unnamed Japanese government officials, Reuters reported on February 2 that Tokyo was working to connect with the Trump campaign to gain insight into his potential future government, but had so far been rebuffed.

Tokyo appears concerned that Trump could upend the last few years of growing military collaboration with Washington and Seoul, potentially cutting out Japan in order to strike a deal with Beijing while reducing support for Taiwan. In order to goad Beijing into a war, the US and Japan have been undermining the “One China” policy, which states that the island is a part of China.

Reuters stated, “The Japanese officials said they had no specific knowledge of Trump's plans, but they based their concerns on his public comments and

actions during his 2017-2021 term, in which he eschewed some multilateral cooperation, defended his relationships with authoritarian leaders such as China's Xi Jinping, and unsuccessfully sought a nuclear deal with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un."

In addition, while Japan and South Korea have pursued closer relations with NATO in recent years as they back the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and prepare to launch a war against China, Trump's comments on NATO, including at a recent campaign event, no doubt worsen Japanese officials' concerns. On February 10, Trump claimed he would allow Russia to "do whatever the hell they want" to NATO nations that do not meet Washington's demands for increased military spending.

Tokyo is also worried that Trump could renew his protectionist "America First" trade war against China and US allies alike, which could include new tariffs against Japanese companies while demanding Japan pay more to host US troops. Trump has already stated that if elected he would block Nippon Steel's recent acquisition of US Steel, a deal worth \$US14.9 billion.

In implementing these measures, Trump would only be pursuing the interests of US imperialism more openly and nakedly than Biden and the Democrats. In reaching out to Pyongyang, Tokyo is making contingency plans to secure its own imperialist interests in the Indo-Pacific region. This includes pushing forward with its plans for remilitarization involving the de facto doubling of military spending to two percent of GDP by 2027.

The Kishida administration's focus on the North Korean abduction issue serves the ultimate goal of remilitarization while also deflecting public attention from the fundraising scandal that has embroiled the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) since November. LDP Diet members have been accused of underreporting income from fundraising events and then receiving the money as kickbacks. Last month, several LDP members were indicted without arrest and another was arrested on suspicion of destroying evidence.

As a result, Kishida's approval rating is hovering in the 20 percent range, which could impact his ability to remain in power ahead of an LDP leadership election this September. His administration no doubt feels that it must score some type of political victory. The next

general election is scheduled for October 2025.

By raising the abduction issue, Kishida is also appealing to far-right groups in Japan that exploit the kidnappings to further their own reactionary agendas. This includes revising the constitution's Article 9, which bans Japan from fielding a military or waging war. These groups, including those within the LDP or that are well-connected to the ruling party, provide a crucial basis of support for politicians like Kishida. As such, the goal is not to resolve the issue, but to use it to promote Japan's remilitarization while whipping up anti-North Korean sentiment to justify war.

Kishida is not the first Japanese prime minister in recent years to try to hold a summit with Kim Jong Un though the last such summit between Koizumi and Kim Jong Il was nearly two decades ago. Both the governments of Shinzo Abe and Yoshihide Suga attempted to meet with Kim Jong Un to pursue the same political agenda.

The latest Japanese bid for a summit with North Korea is a symptom of the underlying fragility of imperialist alliances as each pursues their own predatory nationalist interests and the reverberations already being felt in ruling circles around the world emanating from the political crisis surrounding the US elections.



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