



Koizumi Visits Pyongyang: Beginner's luck?

by Yumiko Nakagawa

Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's visit to North Korea on Sept. 17 yielded an unexpected surprise: North Korea's Dear Leader Kim Jong-il confirmed the abduction of Japanese citizens by "elements of the military" and made the first-ever official apology. Kim also provided information on the abductees' whereabouts. While the number of those accounted for has varied in different press reports, as many as 14 may be missing (three more than the Japanese government had confirmed): eight are dead, five are alive, and the condition of one is unknown. This announcement resulted in a 10 percent increase in Koizumi's approval rating to 61 percent virtually overnight. It also marked a step forward for Japanese diplomacy: Tokyo has demonstrated its ability to take a leadership role in foreign policy without help from the U.S. - Japan's big brother for the last fifty years. However, matters are not so simple in the domestic theater and the trip was not a total victory in the eyes of the Japanese people.

Koizumi's visit seems to have resulted in increased public hostility towards North Korea and has highlighted the government's failure to protect its citizens at home and abroad. The wide media coverage in Japan of the heartbreaking press conference held by the families of the abductees focused largely on the human tragedies brought to light by the Kim-Koizumi meeting rather than the resulting diplomatic breakthrough. Consequently, the backlash against North Korea has already begun. North Korean nationals living in Japan have become easy targets for angry Japanese; many have received death threats, despite the fact that they, too, were abductees. (The majority of North Koreans living in Japan were abducted by the Japanese government during World War II.)

These acts have been committed by a few individuals whose views do not represent the general sentiment in Japan and should not lead to further violence. That said, according to a Sept. 18 Asahi poll, 76 percent of those polled have expressed dissatisfaction with the DPRK's handling of the abduction issue, but, 81% approved of the Kim-Koizumi meeting. Although diplomatic relations might develop between North Korea and Japan, mistrust and hostility against North Korea, at least among the Japanese public, will likely persist.

Anger has also been directed against the Japanese government. The deaths of five Japanese citizens who were abducted and taken from their own country surely damages the Japanese government's credibility in the eyes of its people. The Foreign Ministry (the Japanese public's favorite target of criticism), and Koizumi and his Chief Cabinet Secretary Fukuda (the favorite targets of political leaders) have not gained credit for eliciting an apology from Kim Jong-il. In the eyes of much of the Japanese public, only five are alive and the other eight were neglected for more than twenty years by successive administrations. Whether the remaining five will return to Japan remains uncertain,

although Kim has offered to help arrange a reunion. It will be essential for Koizumi to follow-up on Kim's offer in order to recover his credibility. The Japanese government has already demanded a thorough investigation of the deaths of the eight, and this must yield detailed information and credible results. Most importantly, the government will need to make its own apology to the families and bring the remaining five abductees to Japan.

In the international arena, Koizumi seems to have scored some diplomatic points, although whether this visit to Pyongyang will contribute to regional stability remains to be seen. Nevertheless, Koizumi's meeting with Kim Jong-il is considered a historic event. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan called it a "success" and a contribution to stability in the region. South Korean President Kim Dae-jung "highly-rates" Koizumi's achievement and the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade released an official statement that welcomed the outcome of the meeting and acknowledged the "significant importance" of resuming normalization talks between Japan and the DPRK. The Chinese Foreign Ministry also praised the meeting as an "important achievement."

Washington's response, however, was rather subdued. U.S. National Security Council Advisor Condoleezza Rice "welcomed and supported" Prime Minister Koizumi's effort. Mainichi reported that U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage stated the meeting was good "from PM Koizumi's point of view." Ironically, the positive outcome of Koizumi's Pyongyang meeting is that it may deprive Washington's hard-liners of another reason to oppose an engagement policy with the DPRK, especially the long-anticipated visit by Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James Kelly to Pyongyang.

Washington should welcome the outcome of Japan's initiative and cooperation, at least on the part of a partner in "the world's most important bilateral relationship bar none." Tokyo demonstrated its independence in addressing its own key diplomatic issue of the abductees without relying on Washington as a channel, as had previously been the case. At the same time, Tokyo recognized the delicacy and complexity of all concerned issues and made a sincere effort to update Washington and Seoul on its preparation for the Sept. 17 meeting. As such, Tokyo's close coordination and follow-up with Washington and Seoul should be welcomed.

The Sept. 17 meeting's significance lies in the fact that Japan has been relatively invisible in the diplomatic theater. The effect of Japan-DPRK normalization talks will likely have an impact beyond the bilateral framework and may carry the risk of upsetting the delicate balance on the Peninsula. Japan's status as a global economic power (though declining) and North Korea's negative reputation makes this bilateral relationship an international concern: any warming of relations between the two states may well indicate the beginning of the end of the DPRK's isolation. Given this, Tokyo should not be content with a shallow diplomatic achievement. Normalization talks should take international concerns, such as weapons of mass destruction, into

consideration. This requires Tokyo's continued coordination with Washington and Seoul.

The reality is that Koizumi's success is no guarantee of a significant change in Kim Jong-il's attitude. Many might suggest that Koizumi was lucky that his gamble did not end disastrously, but the prime minister does deserve more credit. Koizumi spoke not only for Japan, but also for the rest of the world, including the U.S. In addition to abduction issues, Koizumi addressed international concerns regarding the moratorium on missile-testing (as outlined in the 1994 U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework) and its extension beyond the 2003 deadline, as well as issues surrounding the resumption of dialogue between the DPRK and both the U.S. and South Korea. Whether he made any firm promises or not, Kim Jong-il expressed his interest in extending the moratorium and sent a message via Koizumi to U.S. President George W. Bush to resume dialogue.

Handling North Korea will be not easy business. Given the regime's behavior in the past, it would be wise for Japan to proceed extremely cautiously. Now that Tokyo has announced its plan to resume normalization talks in October, Japan will now become a larger player in this tricky game. In addition, the unresolved issues in the domestic arena (the abductees, the spy-boat, and public hostility towards the DPRK) may become obstacles to normalization talks. The real test for Japan's diplomatic ability will come once the abduction issues are off the table: how many more concessions will Tokyo be able to draw from North Korea? Closer coordination and discussion among Japan, the U.S., and South Korea across the track-one and track-two levels are needed more than ever. Prime Minister Koizumi has enjoyed beginner's luck so far, but there are no guarantees for the next time.

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