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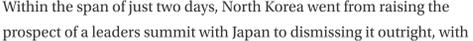
North Korea reaches for familiar playbook in talks with Japan



Kim Jong Un and his daughter Kim Ju Ae attend the opening ceremony of the Gangdong Greenhouse in North Korea in this picture released on March 16. | KCNA / VIA REUTERS

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Within the span of just two days, North Korea went from raising the prospect of a leaders summit with Japan to dismissing it outright, with leader Kim Jong Un's powerful sister saying Pyongyang will refuse "any contact and negotiations" with Tokyo in the future.

Kim Yo Jong's remarks on Tuesday, just a day after she revealed that Prime Minister Fumio Kishida had requested a summit with her brother, were widely seen as part of a familiar playbook employed by the North as it seeks the upper hand in negotiations Tokyo hopes could eventually resolve the long-festering abductee issue and ease strained tensions, including over Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs.

Here's a look at recent events in the relationship, how they got there and where things may be headed.

No contact, no negotiations?

In remarks carried by state-run media Kim Yo Jong, a key adviser to her brother, said North Korea will refuse "any contact and negotiations" with Japan. This came after Tokyo earlier labeled as "totally unacceptable" Pyongyang's view that the issue of Japanese nationals abducted by North Korean agents in the 1970s and 80s had already been resolved.



Even if Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un were to meet, the Japanese leader is unlikely to tackle nuclear and missile issues, according to Tomohiko Kawaguchi, a professor at Nihon University. | KYODO

Alleging that Japan "has no courage to change history ... and take the first step" to improve relations, Kim Yo Jong appeared to nix the possibility of a leaders summit.

The stunning comments came on the heels of her announcement that Kishida had conveyed his hopes of meeting her brother "as soon as possible" to the North. But improving relations, she said, would hinge on whether Japan was willing to make "a political decision" — a veiled reference to what Pyongyang has called the "already-settled" abduction issue.

Kishida, who is grappling with a faltering approval rating amid a slush fund scandal that has enveloped his ruling Liberal Democratic Party, on Tuesday declined to comment on the latest turn of events, but said that "Japan will continue to make efforts under its existing policies."

Abduction hurdle

Any effort to improve the neighbors' relations will hinge on one key issue: the long-standing impasse on the abductions.

Although there was progress in the early 2000s, when then-Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visit to North Korea paved the way for the return of five abductees to Japan and charted a path toward the normalization of ties, the death of Kim Jong Il in 2011 and the rise of his son Kim Jong Un — with his focus on building a nuclear deterrent — saw questions over the fates of the 12 remaining abductees relegated to the back burner.

In the ensuing years, the issue would be employed only to buy time or further obfuscate the issue.

In recent months, however, North Korea appeared to soften its position, with Kim Jong Un sending a rare sympathy message to Japan following the January Noto Peninsula earthquake and Pyongyang welcoming Kishida's announcement last May that he was seeking high-level talks.



Kim Yo Jong arrives at the Vostochny Cosmodrome before a meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and her brother Kim Jong Un, in the far eastern Amur region, Russia, in September. Her remarks late on Tuesday appeared to raise the possibility of Pyongyang and Tokyo's leaders summit. | SPUTNIK / POOL / VIA REUTERS

But signs were clear from the start that trouble lay ahead — Pyongyang had a caveat: A "new decision" by Tokyo on the abductee issue would be needed if ties were to improve.

Kishida's administration has publicly ruled this out, but even if Kishida and Kim were to meet, it's unlikely the Japanese leader would tackle the pressing nuclear and missile issues, which would be the territory of Kim and the United States, said Tomohiko Kawaguchi, a professor at Nihon University focusing on East Asia.

"If Kishida were to resolve anything, it would only be the abduction issue," Kawaguchi said, noting that even late former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who also advocated for talks with Kim and pushed Pyongyang to open an ultimately futile probe into the abductions in 2014, was unable to make progress on the issue.

"Even the strong Abe couldn't resolve it," he said. "So, what can a government that's already on the brink of collapse like Kishida's do? North Korea understands this well."

Familiar playbook

While the Kim regime's response to Kishida — the first public diplomatic outreach to one of its adversaries — is being portrayed by Pyongyang as an olive branch, it may actually be obscuring a more traditional strategy.

Skeptics have said that at least one of the goals of this outreach is to drive a wedge between Tokyo's ever-closer trilateral and bilateral ties with Seoul and Washington.

"North Korea is fairly consistent in its pattern of international behavior and opportunism, in that it is constantly looking to exploit differences among neighboring states to divide their efforts and maximize the possibility to gain concessions," said Christopher Hughes, a professor at Warwick University in England and an expert on Indo-Pacific politics.

Revisiting this playbook now would come at an opportune time for the Kims, and is almost surely intentional, said Shunji Hiraiwa, a professor and expert focusing on international relations in East Asia.

Kishida will make a highly anticipated state visit to Washington on April 10, with South Korea holding general elections the same day. Meanwhile, U.S. President Joe Biden is gearing up for a replay of his 2020 election battle with former U.S. President Donald Trump, the first sitting president to meet the North Korean leader.

Considering this, Pyongyang appears to be using this moment to reap whatever concessions it can, observers say.

"North Korea wants to see how far it can push the envelope and see if Kishida will take a major political risk at home for a summit with Pyongyang on North Korea's terms," said Rachel Minyoung Lee, a senior fellow with the North Korea-watching 38 North program.

"If he does, great. If he does not, what has North Korea to lose?"

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