

THE SECOND KOIZUMI-KIM JONG IL SUMMIT

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Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's summit meeting with Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang on May 23 was the second of its kind in 20 months. The first Koizumi-Kim summit, held in Pyongyang on September 17, 2002, marked the first time that such a tete-a-tete had occurred between the reclusive North Korean leader and a head of government of a Group of Seven (G-7) nation. The second summit between the two set a new record in a dual sense: no leader of a G-7 nation had ever visited North Korea twice, and two consecutive summits between leaders of countries that do not recognize each other are without precedent in diplomatic history.

How did this extraordinary development come about? What were the main differences between the two summits? How may one assess gains and losses (or costs) for both sides?

Had the agreements reached in September 2002 been faithfully implemented, Koizumi's second trip to the North would not have been necessary. The hope that Tokyo-Pyongyang relations would improve along the lines envisioned by the Japan-DPRK Pyongyang declaration, however, was quickly dashed. For the abduction issue not only remained unresolved but also became a major stumbling block in the implementation of the Pyongyang declaration. With the return of five kidnap victims to Japan shortly after the summit, the issue of their children and spouse who remained in the North--that is, whether the latter would be allowed to join their parents and spouse in Japan--emerged as a bone of contention. No less contentious was the issue of ten other Japanese kidnap victims--Tokyo suspects that some or all of them may be alive but Pyongyang claims that there is no record of two of them ever having entered the North and that the remaining eight have died of illness or accident.

A Comparison of the Two Summits

The two Koizumi-Kim Jong Il summits had several common features. First, both were one-day affairs. Second, they were "no frills, strictly business" events. There were not even working lunches. Third, both took place in Pyongyang, not in Tokyo or even a third country. Finally, both produced results that entailed costs and benefits for each side.

On balance, however, differences eclipsed similarities. If the first summit produced unanticipated results--notably, Kim Jong Il's stunning admission that North Korean agents had abducted a dozen Japanese nationals in the 1970s and 1980s and his apology to Koizumi--the second summit lacked any real surprises. For both the Japanese government and public expected the main result of Koizumi's second North Korea visit to be the reunion of the kidnap victims' families--that is, Koizumi would bring to Japan those family members who remained in the North. Such expectation, to be sure, was only partially fulfilled, for three of the eight family members chose not to join the others in accompanying Koizumi to Japan. Bringing the five children of four kidnap victims to Japan, nonetheless, was a tangible outcome of the second summit, something its predecessor conspicuously lacked.

Coupled with the absence of any surprises, the second summit was also notable for the absence of any joint statement. The two sides instead reaffirmed their commitment to the Pyongyang declaration of September 2002. Another difference pertains to the specificity with which Japan pledged humanitarian aid to the North. Although, in the first summit, Japan did enumerate the categories of "economic cooperation" it would provide the North "after the normalization of diplomatic relations"--notably "grant aids, long-term loans with low interest rates" and "humanitarian assistance through international organizations"--, there was no mention of the type or quantity of aid. In the second summit, however, Japan specifically promised to provide the North with 250,000 tons of food aid and medical equipment valued at \$10 million through international organizations.

The subtle snub Koizumi received during his second visit to Pyongyang is also noteworthy. During his first visit, Koizumi was greeted by a high-powered North Korean welcoming party headed by Kim Yong Nam, the president of the presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly, who is ranked number two in Pyongyang's power hierarchy and performs the functions of the DPRK's head of state. In sharp contrast, the highest-ranking official who greeted Koizumi at Pyongyang's Sunan Airport on May 23 was Kim Yong Il, a vice foreign minister (who is outranked by such other vice foreign ministers as Kang Sok Ju and Kim Kye Gwan). The second summit was also shorter than the first, lasting only 90 minutes. If the translation time is factored in, this means that the two leaders had only 45 minutes in which to exchange their views and find some common ground.

Gains and Losses

What did Koizumi gain from his second encounter and talks with Kim Jong Il? And did his gains outweigh the costs he had to incur? As already noted, the most important gain

for Koizumi and inferentially for his country was the “return” of five North Korea-born children of four Japanese kidnap victims to their parents’ country, putting an end to the humanitarian tragedy of 18 months of separation among members of the two families. Koizumi later revealed that Pyongyang had made it clear that only his visit would bring about that result.

Although Koizumi failed to help reunite the family of a third kidnap victim, he obtained a commitment from Kim Jong Il that they would have a chance to do so temporarily in a third country, most probably in Beijing. Since Koizumi spent an hour trying to persuade Charles Robert Jenkins, the husband of Soga Hitomi, to come to Japan with their two daughters, however, Koizumi cannot be faulted for Jenkins’ s decision to stay in the North. Nor can one fault Jenkins for fearing that he might be extradited to the U.S. to face a court martial for desertion once he stepped foot in Japan. The two countries have an extradition treaty, and should Washington decide to request Jenkins’ s extradition, Japan would have no choice but to comply.

Whether Koizumi’ s extraction of a commitment from Kim Jong Il to conduct a “full-scale reinvestigation with the participation of Japan” on the ten “missing Japanese nationals” who Japan contends were also abducted to the North can be rated as a gain is problematical. What form Japan’ s participation will take is uncertain, and working-level negotiations on such procedural and other issues may turn out to be contentious.

On the North Korean nuclear issue, Koizumi had a chance to convey to Kim Jong Il the consensus of Japan, South Korea, and the U.S. on the necessity of the North’ s complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantling of its nuclear program. Although Kim is undoubtedly familiar with the three countries’ unified position, it was nonetheless useful to explain the importance and ramifications of the nuclear issue face to face with the North’ s supreme leader, the only person who can change the DPRK’ s policy in a fundamental way. One patent gain was Kim’ s explicit commitment to maintain a moratorium on missile tests.

On a personal level, the second summit may have produced a net political gain for Koizumi. Nearly 70 percent of respondents in a Kyodo news agency poll gave a positive assessment of his second North Korea visit, even though a higher percentage of them indicated that the abduction issue remains unresolved. Such favorable public opinion, however, is offset to a considerable extent by criticisms by politicians, including a few in Koizumi’ s own political party.

Losses or costs Koizumi incurred included Japan's multiple commitments: (1) to provide 250,000 tons of food aid and medical equipment worth \$10 million, (2) resume the suspended normalization talks and (3) refrain from imposing sanctions on the North as long as the provisions of the Pyongyang declaration are upheld. Since these translate into Kim Jong Il's gains, let us examine them under that rubric.

The single most important gain for Kim and his country was the promise of economic or humanitarian aid. Should the food aid promised by Koizumi materialize, it would mark the first time in four years that Japan provided food to the North. In 2000 Japan supplied the North a total of 600,000 tons of rice on two separate occasions. In October it gave the North 500,000 tons of Japanese rice valued at 120 billion yen (\$1 billion) but the aggravation of the abduction issue in the subsequent years led to a complete suspension of Japan's humanitarian assistance to the North. If the Japanese government carries out its decision to supply not rice but wheat and maize to the North through the World Food Program, however, the cost would be markedly lower--between 6 and 7 billion yen (\$63 million and \$72 million). For a country suffering from a severe shortage of food and foreign exchange alike such as North Korea, however, 250,000 tons of wheat and maize would go a long way toward meeting its dire need. Medical equipment valued at \$10 million, too, would be most welcome for the North, whose medical facilities and supplies are woefully deficient.

The agreement to resume normalization talks is good news for the North as well. Should they bear fruit, the North is certain to receive a big payoff--in the form of "economic cooperation" that may total \$10 billion. Although it will most likely be stretched over a decade, the Japanese assistance, or "compensation" as the North is certain to construe it, will nonetheless become the largest infusion of foreign capital into the North in recent decades.

Kim Jong Il also took advantage of his second summit with Koizumi to underscore that the U.S. remains a major factor in the equation. He did so directly by stressing that whether Pyongyang-Tokyo relations would make headway would hinge largely on the attitudes and positions of Japan's ally, meaning the U.S. Indirectly, Kim Jong Il drove home to Koizumi the role of the U.S. in preventing Jenkins and his two daughters from going to Japan to join his wife and their mother. Kim Jong Il may have hoped either to drive a wedge between Tokyo and Washington or to induce Tokyo to help moderate the Bush administration's unbending hard line toward the North.

Symbolically, Kim Jong Il got a chance to demonstrate to the North Korean people that the top leader of the world's second largest economy took the trouble to come to

Pyongyang. Koizumi was portrayed in the North Korean media as seeking the North's help and reaffirming commitments to implementing the Pyongyang declaration and transforming hostile relations into friendly ones.

The price Kim Jong Il paid for all this was minimal. The agreement to allow the five children of four Japanese kidnap victims to join their parents in Japan didn't really cost the North much. Keeping them in the North, actually, would have been more costly. One possible adverse consequence would be the revelation of the mistreatment the kidnap victims had received during their long involuntary stay in the North. The four kidnap victims who have been fortunate to be reunited with their children may now feel free to speak out about conditions in the North as they saw and experienced them.

Kim's promise to reopen an investigation into the ten Japanese kidnap victims cannot be regarded as a major cost, either. On the other hand, the issue remains as a symbol of the persistence of the kidnap issue and may even turn out to be a stumbling block on the path toward further progress in Japan-DPRK relations.

In sum, the second Koizumi-Kim Jong Il summit was a noteworthy event, which yielded gains for and exacted costs from both sides. In the short run, it helped to break the impasse in bilateral relations. Whether it will help pave the way for normalization of relations between the two countries, however, remains to be seen. What seems reasonably certain is that diplomacy, whether it be of the summit kind or not, offers the best opportunities for resolving inter-state disputes, large and small, even when one is dealing with such isolated and opaque countries as the DPRK.