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Dim Prospects for a North Korea-Japan Summit Soon

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After North Korea's [diplomatic outreach to Russia](#) last year, observers are wondering if Japan will be the next target of its engagement. In January, Chairman Kim Jong-un issued a rare message of condolence after an [earthquake](#) devastated the Noto Peninsula in northern Japan. The Japanese side acknowledged the message, and Prime Minister Kishida Fumio reiterated his intention to hold a summit with his reclusive counterpart. Diplomacy with Pyongyang should be welcomed, given its precarious internal situation and destabilizing external behavior. But it is difficult to foresee how Japan can realize actual negotiations with North Korea.

Speculation of a possible Kim-Kishida summit started a few days after the New Year's Day earthquake in Japan. On January 6th, North Korean [state media reported](#) that Chairman Kim sent a "message of sympathy" to Prime Minister Kishida and the Japanese people. "The message sincerely hoped that the people in the affected areas would eradicate the aftermath of earthquakes and restore their stable life at the earliest date possible," according to the Korea Central News Agency. Japanese officials [acknowledged receipt of the message](#), noting that there had not been a similar message after a massive earthquake destroyed huge areas of northern Japan on March 11, 2011 (support had only been extended to ethnic Koreans living in Japan). In early February, Prime Minister Kishida [told the Diet](#) that Japan "expressed our gratitude for the message of sympathy" from Chairman Kim. On another day, [he also said](#) that Japan would "make the appropriate responses" towards North Korea in light of the message.

The unexpected missive ignited speculation that it heralded the start of a new diplomatic initiative from North Korea. This intensified after the chairman's sister released another statement through North Korean state media. Observers highlighted Kim Yo-jong's assertion that a friendly North Korea-Japan relationship could pave the way for a summit between their respective leaders. "There will be no reason for the two countries not to become close and the day of the prime minister's Pyongyang visit might come," she said in a statement carried by the Korean Central News Agency. *The Korea Times* observed that the statements came amid Pyongyang's deepening international isolation. The recent decision by Cuba to establish relations with South Korea was "the biggest diplomatic failure since Kim Jong-un took power," Dr. Cheong Seong-chang of the Sejong Institute told the paper. "Optimism about a Kishida-Kim summit is based on facts," said the paper in a February editorial. "Kim has nothing to lose if the summit is held, and a lot more to gain," the editorial also said.

Despite this optimism, a plain reading of the Kim Yo-jong statement makes it difficult to see how Japan can realize a bilateral summit. She was quite clear that Japan must do two things to establish good relations with North Korea: stop bringing up the issue of Japanese abductees and criticism of its illicit nuclear and missile development. Ms. Kim emphasized this point in a statement published by state media at the end of March. She acknowledged that Japan had informed North Korea of its desire to hold a bilateral summit. But she also said that this is an impossibility so long as Japan remains intent on raising the aforementioned two issues. "What is clear is that when Japan infringes upon the sovereignty of the DPRK, doggedly standing hostile to it, the former will become a target of the latter, being regarded as its enemy, never a friend," said Ms. Kim in remarks carried by state media.

It is unclear whether or not Japan can relax its position on resolving its concerns regarding the status of its citizens abducted by North Korea. The first statement by Kim Yo-jong asserted that the abduction issue had been resolved previously. This was received icily in Tokyo. "We cannot accept that," said Chief Cabinet Secretary Hayashi Yoshimasa in a February press briefing. "We remain unchanged that Japan intends to comprehensively resolve pending issues, such as nuclear and missiles and the abductions, based on the Japan-North Korea Pyongyang Declaration." Ms. Kim's statement "cannot be accepted at all," said Yokota Takuya, the leader of a group representing the families of North Korean abductees. At the same time, he later signaled their openness to sanctions relief for North Korea in exchange for the return of all abductees. But it is unclear whether sanctions relief will mollify the Kim regime and its desire for Japan to stop raising the issue at all.

It is even less clear whether Japan will accede to North Korea's demands to stop criticizing it for its illicit nuclear and missile development programs. In early April, Prime Minister Kishida is scheduled to meet with American President Joe Biden in Washington. According to Japanese media, they are expected to issue a joint statement underlying their "strategic partnership." While early details suggest the focus will be on China, North Korea also gets a mention. According to the *Yomiuri Newspaper*, Presidents Biden and Kishida will call for "diplomatic negotiations without preconditions," they will also censure Pyongyang for its development of ballistic missiles and other weapons. This is diametrically opposite of what Kim Yo-jong's said, so this roadblock to a bilateral North Korea-Japan summit will remain.

To be sure, diplomacy is the art of the possible and is always preferable to conflict. Public reporting suggests that North Korean and Japanese officials have been having quiet talks, which is a good development considering the frozen state of US-North Korea diplomacy and inter-Korean relations. Diplomats should feel empowered to look for areas where both Pyongyang and Tokyo are able to make concessions that can stabilize Northeast Asia. But despite the optimistic tone of some commentators, it is hard to see how a Kim-Kishida summit will be realized in the near term.

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