

Koizumi and Kim Jong-Il: Hope for the best, prepare for the worst

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Victor Cha

I. INTRODUCTION

This short piece on the meaning and implications behind Japan's Prime Minister Koizumi's upcoming historical trip to North Korea is by Professor Victor Cha of Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. Cha asserts that while Koizumi's trip to North Korea this month appears to be a positive development aimed at reducing tensions on the Korean peninsula and a step toward convincing the Bush administration's skeptics to press forward with engagement, the mission could end up reinforcing hawk perceptions in Washington that engagement with the DPRK is a necessary, albeit, fruitless exercise, doomed for failure. Professor Cha is also director of the American Alliances in Asia Project at Georgetown University.

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"Koizumi and Kim Jong-Il: Hope for the best, prepare for the worst." By Victor Cha, Georgetown University

Japan's Prime Minister Koizumi's impending trip to North Korea on 17 September appears to be a positive development in reducing tensions on the Korean peninsula. In line with the Bush administration's desire for a beefed up alliance with Tokyo, Koizumi's surprise announcement also reflects positively on Japan's attempts to play a leadership role in the region. Koizumi appears to be taking on the thorny problem of North Korea at a time when the fate of South Korean president Kim Dae Jung's sunshine policy remains uncertain at the end of his presidency. Moreover, U.S. ambivalence about engaging North Korea remains palpable enough that a probe of this sort by a trusted ally may yield the transparency needed for Washington to make the decision to pursue engagement in earnest.

Or not? Though Japan deserves kudos for taking this initiative, is Koizumi being set up as the straight man for Bush hawks? Koizumi cannot fall into the same trap that Kim Dae Jung did of coming back from Pyongyang with handshakes and photo ops but no substantive agreements. Indeed, smiling faces (and nothing else) is just the proof that Bush hawks need to validate their belief that Kim Jong Il is not serious about engagement.

The most meaningful issue for Japan and the United States relates to North Korea's No-Dong missiles. Hundreds of these ballistic missiles, unlike the longer-range Taepo-Dong missile, are actually deployed in North Korea. Moreover any logical extrapolation of North Korea's strategic doctrine suggest these missiles, which can be fitted with chemical warheads, are targeted at Japan (in order to deter the United States and Japan from supporting South Korea in a military confrontation). Can Japan persuade the North to concede on this issue? Doubtful. The North refused even to discuss No-Dong deployments in the missile negotiations with the U.S. at the end of the Clinton administration.

So here in lies the ruse: Koizumi cannot come back from Pyongyang with simple handshakes. He must deliver, especially since the North so badly disrespected Tokyo in normalization talks at the end of 2000 when Japanese negotiators were led to believe that the basic outlines of a package were in the making. At the same time, the agreements that are meaningful (i.e. missiles) are not likely to be in the offering. Facing pressure for results, Koizumi might therefore fall into the trap of handing over some carrots (i.e. cash) for small incremental and symbolic concessions by the North. This sort of summit might play in Seoul, but it won't play in Washington or Tokyo. Moreover, Bush hawks will have their proof that engagement with North Korea is fruitless.

Behind this diplomatic theater sits a deeper and more disturbing message. In conjunction with Kim Jong-Il's recent meeting with Russian president Putin and persistent entreaties by Beijing and Seoul, Koizumi's trip could be seen as another voice in the regional chorus for Bush to get on the engagement bandwagon traversing the Korean peninsula. But these voices also have the unintended effect of widening a gap in beliefs about policy toward North Korea between Washington and its allies in Asia. For those allies, Koizumi's impending trip validates once again the merits of engagement and Kim Dae Jung's sunshine policy. They believe that engagement will eventually bring the North around. But for the Bush administration, Koizumi's trip reinforces the efficacy of the harder line. Calling the regime "evil" and taking the "hawk," not sunshine, approach to engagement has pressed the North into its conciliatory mode. The further openings by North Korea, the wider this perception gap between the United States and its allies in Asia will grow.

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