

**The Bush Administration's Reaction to
Prime Minister Koizumi's Pyongyang Summit**

by

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Prime Minister Koizumi's diplomatic initiative toward North Korea caught the Bush Administration off guard. After all, the two close allies are headed in opposite directions. While Japan's prime minister pursues peace in Northeast Asia, America's president appears intent on making war with Iraq while continuing global war on terrorism. Then too, Koizumi's diplomatic effort proposes to do what mighty Washington has failed to do since signing the US-DPRK Agreed Framework in 1994 - clear the way for a great leap toward the normalization of their relations.

The White House initially greeted Koizumi's announcement with polite disbelief. Much of official Washington found it difficult to take seriously Koizumi's announcement. No Japanese leader had made such a risky diplomatic initiative since World War II. Many of Washington's foreign policy watchers apparently believed Koizumi's political advisers, and quite possibly negative public sentiment, would deter him from going to Pyongyang. Few in Washington believed North Korea's leader would take the concrete steps necessary to resolve the politically sensitive and emotionally charged issue of the abducted Japanese citizens.

Now that the Koizumi-Kim summit has occurred, and the two leaders have signed their first joint diplomatic note, the Bush Administration seems perplexed about how to follow up on the Prime Minister's success. Preoccupied with Iraq, President Bush and his senior foreign policy advisers, including the Secretary of State, have kept North Korea and the Koizumi-Kim summit near the bottom of their priority list. Topping the list are Iraq, legislative and military preparations for war, the war on terrorism, the sagging American economy and the November mid-term Congressional elections. But before all else, the Bush Administration wants Saddam

Hussein banished or defeated. Until then, Kim Jong Il will have to wait, according to President Bush.

Washington's reaction, in other words, has been complex. Actually, there have been multiple reactions to each of the summit's various phases. Stunned silence followed the announcement of Mr. Koizumi's intention. The Bush Administration was still settling into the White House after a long vacation in Texas. Throughout August, President Bush concentrated on raising funds and campaigning for Republican candidates in the upcoming November mid-term Congressional elections. The U.S. Congress, similarly preoccupied throughout August, was on the road back to Capital Hill. The Washington press corps and political pundits in Washington's think tanks were dusting off their desks and sorting piles of unopened mail that had accumulated during their August vacations. Washington's agenda for September did not include a surprise summit between Japan and North Korea. For Washington's foreign policy community, war with Iraq topped the agenda. The mass media was focused on the pervasive corruption in America's mega-corporations, the continuing round up of al Qaeda terrorists and preparations to cover the commemoration ceremonies of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

Once back in Washington, President Bush immediately began to grapple with a growing chorus of criticism of his unilateral military approach to Iraq. Pointed criticism from prominent Republicans like former National Security Adviser to the previous Bush Administration, retired army general Brent Scowcroft, stung painfully. Former Reagan Administration Secretary of State George Shultz followed with an op-ed article in the Washington Post that signaled a major change in the Administration's tactics. Shultz urged the President to shift to a multilateral approach that encompassed the championing of United Nations resolutions aimed at bringing Iraq into compliance with international nuclear non-proliferation requirements instead of threatening to overthrow the Iraqi ruler. Bush abruptly shelved his unilateral approach, one which Vice President Chaney and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld championed, and rediscovered the United Nations and Secretary of State Powell.

Koizumi's government is certain to have kept the United States informed about the secret talks that set the stage for the Pyongyang summit. Actual notification of the Japan-DPRK agreement to convene the summit probably came soon after it had been finalized. Deputy Secretary Armitage and Under Secretary of State for International Security Affairs Bolton undoubtedly learned of this during

their late August visits to Tokyo. Like their colleagues in Washington, they politely welcomed Koizumi's initiative with expressions of support, words of caution and polite disbelief. After all, few in Washington could believe that, after twelve years of frustrated expectations and hesitation, yet another round of secret talks between Tokyo and Pyongyang could yield such a dramatic outcome.

The Department of State subsequently uttered Washington's initial, official reaction. It came at the September 7, 2002, Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TICOG) meeting in Seoul. The United States and Republic of Korea, in subdued diplomatic language, expressed support for Japan's initiative in the group's joint statement, "(we) welcomed the recent progress in the talks between Japan and North Korea. In particular, they expressed their strong support for Prime Minister Koizumi's visit to North Korea, which they hope will contribute to the improvement of Japan-DPRK relations and the promotion of regional stability in Northeast Asia."

In short, the Bush Administration gave Koizumi's announcement only a brief glance, primarily because of its preoccupation with Iraq and preparations to address the United Nations. America's mass media followed the Administration's lead. The impending Pyongyang summit received only brief mention in a few newspapers. Meanwhile, Washington's small circle of East Asian experts began debating whether Koizumi would return from Pyongyang empty handed or not, and whether Kim Jong Il would leave with his diplomatic tea cup half empty or half full.

On September 12, polite disbelief again greeted Prime Minister Koizumi when he met President Bush at their brief New York summit. The meeting came the day after Bush had pressed the United Nations General Assembly to act promptly and decisively to punish Saddam Hussein. The American president listened briefly and politely, expressed support and best wishes, but then immediately returned to his rattling of sabers at Iraq's leader and supervision of Secretary of State Powell's effort to rally support for his war initiative in the UN Security Council. Again, America's mass media followed the President's lead and gave the New York meeting only a quick glance.

On September 18, news of Prime Minister Koizumi's history making summit reached a sleepy Washington at dawn. The outcome of the summit in Pyongyang went largely ignored by official Washington, except for the Department of State. After all, Prime Minister Koizumi had taken a major step toward a durable peace in Northeast Asia. But the Bush Administration, U.S. Congress and Washington's

large press corps remained fixated on possible war with Iraq. Hard working correspondents from Japan and South Korea were undeterred. Up at the crack of dawn, their efforts to learn Washington's reaction quickly attracted attention to Koizumi's accomplishment.

As before, Washington remained politely supportive but preoccupied with Iraq. At a press briefing on September 18, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld was caught unprepared to comment on Koizumi's visit to Pyongyang. When asked whether the Secretary was concerned that Koizumi's diplomacy might perpetuate Kim Jong Il's regime, Rumsfeld stumbled to find words, "Well, look Japan is an important country. It has a very capable military. It has an enormous GDP. It's a country that we value as a very close friend. We have an alliance with them." He concluded his rambling remarks, "I'm not worried at all that Japan is going to do anything that would be inadvisable from the standpoint of missile proliferation. Indeed, my recollection is (that) Japan's been quite careful with respect to banned technologies and avoiding their proliferation." Obviously, Rumsfeld and his staff had paid little attention to the Pyongyang summit.

On September 19, at the first White House press briefing after the Pyongyang summit, the President's spokesman Ari Fleischer again dropped the ball. When asked about a recent telephone exchange between Bush and Koizumi, the spokesman struggled to recall, inaccurately, the chronology of positive developments on the Korean Peninsula since July. He concluded with an expression of support for Koizumi's effort before abruptly calling upon a correspondent from Latin American.

Meanwhile, America's mass media remained largely silent, waiting to hear from their correspondents in Tokyo.

The Department of State saved the Bush Administration's "face" with a coherent statement about the Koizumi-Kim summit. In a September 17 statement, the Department's spokesman said, "We welcome and support Prime Minister Koizumi's efforts. We note that he discussed matters of particular Japanese concern, but also raised security issues of broad international interest on which the U.S. and Japan share concerns." He concluded, "We look forward to continuing to coordinate closely with our Japanese and South Korean allies, and in assessing the results of the Prime Minister's visit ..."

The same day, U.S. Ambassador to South Korea Thomas Hubbard told a morning meeting of the Asia Society in Washington, “Prime Minister Koizumi’s visit ... has produced some results that have to be described as positive. ... We’ll have to see in subsequent dialogue. But there is a positive process in place between Japan and North Korea just as there seems to be a positive process in place involving South Korea. We are studying these developments very carefully, very closely.” He concluded with the often repeated Bush Administration claim, “..., our offer to have a dialogue with North Korea remains on the table ...”

The Administration’s continuing foot dragging on whether and when to engage North Korea in dialogue suggests bureaucratic dueling continues within the Administration on how to deal with North Korea. If a consensus existed, the State Department already would be poised to follow up by sending its own negotiating team to Pyongyang in the very near future.

Washington’s quarreling factions begin at opposite ends of the argument. Moderates like Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs James Kelly and his close aide Ambassador Jack Pritchard believe Kim Jong Il is moving in a generally positive direction and can be induced, through deterrence backed diplomacy, to comply with international nuclear safeguards, to disarm its threatening military posture toward South Korea and Japan, and to ceasing its proliferation of ballistic missiles. Under Secretary of State for International Security Affairs John Bolton, in league with Defense Secretary Rumsfeld and his deputy Paul Wolfowitz, countered that Kim Jong Il cannot be trusted, his conciliatory gestures are mere ploys to garner the resources he needs to shore up his bankrupt regime, and the U.S. would do well to deal with him decisively, but first comes Iraq.

Meanwhile, the National Security Council follows its leader, President Bush. For months, Bush has shown no inclination to halt the inter-agency’s quarreling. Actually, it serves his purpose. While he steps up the rhetoric and military pressure on Iraq, he keeps Pyongyang wondering whether it might be next on the President’s “Axis of Evil” hit list. The apparent hope is that Kim Jong Il’s regime, economically feeble domain, hungry and impoverished population and increasingly obsolete military, will either collapse or concede to U.S. demands.

This assessment ignores some significant considerations. Beijing and Moscow are not about to allow Pyongyang to collapse. Since 1995, China has delivered large amounts of food, oil and coal to North Korea to prevent its economic

demise. Also, the international community, specifically United Nations humanitarian organizations and the European Union, have delivered large amounts of food aid and other humanitarian aid to North Korea. Nor is collapse in Seoul's interest. Beginning in 1998, South Korean economic cooperation and trade with North Korea has grown steadily. According to Seoul's Bank of Korea, the North Korean economy has begun a slow recovery.

In all likelihood, collapse would undermine peace and stability in Northeast Asia. The most likely consequences of collapse are civil war between military rivals in North Korea, possibly prompting intervention by South Korea, and possibly the U.S. As Chinese officials continue to quietly reiterate, the China-North Korea security pact remains unaltered. China will defend North Korea if its sovereignty is challenge by armed, external intervention.

North Korea is not about to remain passive if Washington does not soon engage it diplomatically. Pyongyang's hardliners can be counted on to convince their "Great Leader" to forego further diplomacy and to revert to coercive diplomacy and saber rattling which could include, in a worse case scenario, ending its compliance with the Agreed Framework and international nuclear safeguards.

Washington cannot count on hesitation to achieve a durable peace in Northeast Asia. Its avowed policy accents diplomacy, but its inaction is eroding the credibility of this profession. Since July, Seoul, Tokyo and Pyongyang have restarted the process of reconciliation through diplomacy and simultaneous and reciprocal action. Their actions are concrete and unprecedented such as Kim Jong Il's apology to Seoul for the June West Sea naval incident, Kim's apology to Japan regarding the abducted Japanese citizens and opening of a road through the De-militarized Zone. Both Moscow and Beijing are independently encouraging the process. All the while, the Bush Administration continues its inter-agency squabbling and hesitation toward Pyongyang.

Koizumi and Kim Jong Il have clearly put the ball in Bush's court. How and when he responds could either improve prospects that Koizumi's initiative will achieve substantive and enduring progress toward a durable peace in Northeast Asia, or undercut his effort.