

Pyongyang's "Sumo" Diplomacy

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June was an important month for diplomacy in Northeast Asia. Japan and the United States twice engaged North Korea in important diplomatic talks. Prime Minister Koizumi made his second visit to Pyongyang to meet “Supreme Commander” Kim Jong Il. Koizumi had two purposes. First, he wanted Kim to allow the immediate family members of the former abducted Japanese to join their kinsmen in Japan. Secondly, Koizumi pressed Kim to be more flexible regarding the nuclear impasse. Two weeks later, President Bush’s delegation returned to Beijing for the third round of Six Party Talks.

Neither leader got everything they wanted in these talks, but at least they gained something of value. For Koizumi, it was the release of five relatives of former abducted Japanese. Politically, this was a timely and significant gain for Koizumi just before July’s Upper House elections. Next the US delegation left Beijing saying, “Our view is that these have been constructive talks” In other words, a comprehensive agreement remained a distant hope. But at least there had been sufficient progress to justify continuation of the diplomatic dialogue rather than a return to the escalation of tensions.

For many in Tokyo and Washington, the pace of progress in both Japan’s bilateral talks with Pyongyang and the Six Party Talks has been too slow. But now diplomacy has achieved some progress. This has improved prospects for continuing peace in Northeast Asia, a very important development. We need to figure out the reasons for this progress so that we can then quicken the movement toward our goals.

President Bush and Prime Minister Koizumi finally are showing signs that they are learning how to deal with “Supreme Commander” Kim Jong Il. After all, Kim has much more experience dealing with superpowers than both Bush and Koizumi. Despite three years of intense effort, neither leader has achieved their primary goal – the end of North Korea’s weapons of mass destruction. But, finally, they seem to have figured out Kim Jong Il’s diplomatic strategy and ways to more effectively deal with him.

Kim has been conducting “sumo” diplomacy with Bush and Koizumi. Being the leaders of the world’s two superpowers, Bush and Koizumi have resembled two huge sumo wrestlers. Kim, on the other hand, being the leader of one of the world’s smallest and poorest nations, has had to learn to take advantage of his small size and weakness. Each time the giants have tried to use their military and economic might to humble North Korea, the more agile and experienced Kim has merely stepped to one side. This has frustrated Bush and Koizumi, which made them try even harder. Kim simply kept them off balance with his diplomatic agility.

But then Koizumi began to listen to his counter parts in Beijing and Seoul. The leaders of China and South Korea, after all, have been much more effective in getting Pyongyang to cooperate with them. They realized some time ago that trying to corner and subdue Kim Jong Il was a potentially dangerous and frequently futile endeavor. Instead, it was more effective to offer Kim inducements to win his cooperation. After all, the essence of diplomacy is so-called “give and take.”

Koizumi retained his same goals but shifted tactics. First he agreed to visit Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang. This did not cost Japan anything, but in exchange for showing Kim some respect, Koizumi won the release of the former abducted Japanese. It took a second visit to get their kinsmen release. The second time around, Koizumi added to his visit substantial humanitarian aid plus the promise of bilateral normalization talks. This would appear to have been excessive. Now, when the normalization talks commence soon, North Korea will expect a great deal from Japan in exchange for a very little from North Korea.

Meanwhile, the Bush Administration is having the opposite problem. In Beijing at the Six Party Talk's third round, President Bush offered too little to Kim Jong Il and still demanded too much.. But at least Bush demonstrated that he was beginning to learn the importance of inducements. Seoul for several months has been trying to teach him this, but with little affect. Apparently, however, Koizumi convinced Bush to change his tactics when the two leaders chatted at the recent G-8 Summit.

The leaders of the world's two mightiest superpowers finally seem to be learning how to conduct effective diplomacy with North Korea. But they still need to refine their approach. Koizumi so far has given too much for too little. This has excited Pyongyang's expectation that it will continue to get a great deal in exchange for minimal concessions. Before there can be significant progress in the forthcoming Japan-DPRK normalization talks, Japan will have to temper Pyongyang's expectations. Otherwise, if Koizumi continues to give more than he gets, the Japanese people will cease supporting him and his diplomatic dialogue with North Korea.

In Washington, the Bush Administration still must learn that it expects too much for too little regarding North Korea. The only peaceful way to strike a diplomatic deal is to exchange concessions of similar value. A decision to do this, however, this will require some intense political dueling within the Bush Administration. Most likely a resolution of this internal debate will not occur until after the November US Presidential election. This suggests that we should not anticipate significant progress at the next round of Six Party Talks.

On the other hand, the Six Party Talks have convinced all the concerned parties that a peaceful diplomatic solution to the continuing nuclear impasse is preferable to a resumption of tensions and the risk of a second Korean War. The Bush Administration is particularly intent now upon avoiding a return to tensions in Northeast Asia because its commitments in Iraq and to fighting a global war have over extended its military capability. Pyongyang should consider Washington's handicap the equivalent of security assurances. All of this adds up to improving prospects for peace in Northeast Asia and, eventually, even a peaceful negotiated resolution of the nuclear impasse.