



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on February 15, 2024

US Supports Japan's Push for Talks With North Korea, Envoy Says

The United States supports Japan's efforts to hold talks with North Korea and hopes any dialogue would seek to tackle issues ranging from regional security to human rights, Washington's envoy on North Korean human rights issues, Julie Turner, said on February 14.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida told parliament last week he wants to hold a summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and is personally supervising high-level discussions with Pyongyang.

"I can't speak on behalf of the Japanese government on how those conversations are going," Turner told the media on a visit to Tokyo, but "on the U.S. side, we've made clear that we are open to dialogue with the North Koreans without preconditions and so I think that would also apply to our like-minded partners and our close allies."

Furthermore, she said any dialogue should seek resolution on issues including regional security, the human rights situation in North Korea, and the return of Japanese people abducted by North Korea decades ago — a key focus for Tokyo.

Five abductees were returned to Japan after a summit between former Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and then-North Korean leader Kim Jong Il in 2002. The pair also met in 2004, the last face-to-face leadership summit between the countries.

Meanwhile, the last leadership talks between the U.S. and North Korea, under former President Donald Trump, fizzled out in 2019 and faced brickbats for having stifled future dialogue. "Getting back to the table is the priority right now so that we can start working through those issues," said Turner.

Turner said the United States, via its embassy in Beijing, has also been pressuring China not to forcibly repatriate North Koreans to Pyongyang, where they would likely face persecution.

Up to 600 North Koreans have "vanished" after being forcibly deported by China in October, based on a Seoul-based human rights group that warned they may face imprisonment, torture, sexual violence, and execution.

China "has and continues to hold to the argument that these individuals are economic migrants," Turner said. She said Washington is also growing concerned about new groups of North Korean workers being sent overseas. "We certainly have concerns over Russia. There are many that still remain in China as well."



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On Pyongyang's end, the influential sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un said there is no impediment to closer ties with Japan, and that there may come a day when Kishida visits Pyongyang, state news agency KCNA said on February 15.

Kim Yo Jong, a deputy department director in the ruling Workers' Party, said Kishida's aforementioned comments on holding a summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un could be considered positive if meant to advance relations.

"If Japan ... makes a political decision to open a new path for improving ties based on mutual respect and respectful behavior, it is my view that the two countries can open a new future," she was quoted as saying.

Japan has been critical of North Korea's pursuit of ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons, often eliciting reprisals from Pyongyang, particularly as Tokyo ramped up its security alliance with South Korea and the United States.

Kim added that her view was a personal observation and, as far as she knew, the North's leadership had no specific plans for its relations with Japan or to make contact with Tokyo, KCNA said. She is widely deemed as the closest confidante and advisor to her brother on external policy matters.

Notably, Japan is no longer the world's third largest economy after unexpectedly slipping into recession at the end of last year, as per official figures released on February 15. Germany has now moved into third place in terms of nominal GDP.

Japan's GDP shrank by an annualized 0.4 percent in the fourth quarter of last year, following a 3.3-percent slump in the previous quarter. This confounded market forecasts of a 1.4-percent increase over the final three months of the year. A technical recession is broadly defined as two consecutive quarters of contraction.

During the fourth quarter, private consumption dropped by an annualized 0.9 percent, and corporate investment dropped 0.3 percent. Exports rose 11 percent, while imports increased 7.0 percent. "Service consumption has hit a lull, goods prices continue to increase, and because of the warm winter, clothing consumption was lackluster from October onward," a government official said.

Japanese households have been grappling with a rising cost of living and declining real wages that led to a 0.2-percent drop in private consumption, which contributes to more than half of economic activity in the country.

In dollar terms, Japan's GDP stood at \$4.2 trillion at the end of 2023, versus \$4.5 trillion for Germany.

"Two consecutive declines in GDP and three consecutive declines in domestic demand are bad news, even if revisions may change the final numbers at the margin," Stefan Angrick, senior economist at Moody's Analytics, told Reuters, commenting on the news. "This makes it harder for the central bank to justify a rate hike, let alone a series of hikes."

Moreover, disruptions to global supply chains due to ongoing tensions in the Red Sea could last for a year, Japanese shipping giant Mitsui OSK Lines (MOL) recently warned.

Key players in the shipping industry, including MOL, have temporarily avoided the Suez Canal, a vital maritime trade route linking the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea and a critical sea lane for energy and cargo between Asia and Europe. This followed dozens of drone and missile attacks carried out by the Yemen-based Houthi rebels in the Red Sea since the beginning of the Israel-Hamas war in October.



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“It’s a historic event,” MOL President Takeshi Hashimoto said in an interview with Bloomberg, alluding to the transit halt by shipping operators. “The situation will continue at least for the coming two or three months, and as a worst-case scenario, six months or one year,” he noted. MOL is one of the world’s largest ship operators, with a fleet of around 800 vessels.

There are presently enough ships available to withstand the disruption, said Hashimoto, but if the global economy were to suddenly grow and demand for goods increased, there would be a lack of shipping capacity.



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