North Korea reaches for familiar playbook in talks with Japan

Pyongyang is seeking a return to the gestures of days of cordiality with Japan with its recent outreach to the Abe administration and the arrival of Kim Jong Un's sister Kim Yo Jong in Japan last Tuesday. The latest round of talks between the two nations, held over two days, resulted in a declaration of agreement. The talks' main achievement was a commitment to continue high-level contact and negotiations with Tokyo in the future.

STAFF WRITERS

'Single decision' by Tokyo on abduction issue would be a victory for North Korea, 'said Christopher Hughes, a professor at Warwick University in England and an expert on Indo-Pacific security. Kishida will take a major political risk at home for a summit with Kim Jong Un, which observers say is 'a goldmine of opportunities for the U.S. to drive a wedge between Tokyo's ever-closer trilateral and bilateral ties with Seoul and Washington."

In recent months, however, North Korea appeared to soften its stance on the abductions issue, which has been Tokyo's primary demand for talks. This marked a change from earlier, when it steadfastly refused to discuss the issue.

The 12 abducted Japanese were released to Japan in 1996, after seven were freed by then Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi on his visit to Pyongyang in 2002. But North Korea later gave conflicting accounts of what happened to the remaining six, which have become a source of dispute and a political issue for Japan.

Kishida had conveyed his hopes of meeting her brother "as soon as possible" during talks with South Korea's president Moon Jae-in last month. But Moon appeared to nix the possibility to gain concessions, "said Hughes, who has written extensively on North Korea and the Korean War.

"Even the strong Abe couldn't resolve it," he said. "So, what can a Kishida do?"

In the late 1990s, the Abe administration once held a summit with Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang. But that turned out to be a "single decision" that was already been resolved.

A "new decision" by Tokyo on the abductee issue would be a victory for North Korea, " said Hughes. "If he does, great. If he does not, what has North Korea to lose?"

The North's interest in dialogue with Japan is largely tactical, Hughes said. It desires to continue building up its military capabilities while also exchanging messages with Japan to improve its image on the international stage.

"This is a position to see how far Tokyo is willing to go," he said. "After that, we will consider what to do."