

Japan's View of the North Korean Threat

by Kazuto Suzuki

North Korea represents the greatest threat to Japan by far. To put this into perspective, threat perceptions are greater over North Korea today, than the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Four central reasons can explain this view: the unpredictability of Kim Jong-un's regime; the possible "de-coupling" of the US-Japan alliance; fear of a massive refugee crisis; and the potential for increased Chinese influence in the event of conflict.

First, Japanese concerns are fed by a fear that Kim Jong-un's North Korea may not behave as rationally as the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, nuclear deterrence between the United States and the Soviet Union worked to halt a Soviet invasion of Northern Japan. The US-Japan alliance was considered to be a "trip-wire" to ignite a "hot" war between the two superpowers, which may potentially have escalated into a nuclear conflict.

A number of North Korean missiles have already flown over Japan. The risk that one may strike a Japanese city, even if due to malfunctioning or miscalculation, would prove disastrous. Such fears have a strong psychological impact on people in Japan.

Although sanctions are pressuring the North Korean economy, it continues to have access to parts and materials to develop missiles and nuclear capabilities. In addition, Kim Jong-un has demonstrated his rash judgment by assassinating his own uncle and brother in unpredictable ways. Although Japan tends to consider North Korea in rational terms and as a rational actor, there are number of examples of unpredictable behaviour that make it difficult to predict Kim Jong-un's moves.

Another element that highlights the gravity of the threat is concern in Japan

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over a weakening, or “de-coupling” of the Japan-US alliance. Based on the extent of possible military actions by North Korea, it is conceivable that a first target of attack could include US bases in Japan. However, if North Korean missiles reached a level of capability that would allow attacking the US mainland, the US may not fully commit to protect Japan and South Korea.

In the event of military confrontations between North and South Korea or North Korea and Japan, US forces may not protect both countries due to the fear of nuclear attack on Los Angeles, San Francisco or possibly even Washington. If this were to be the case, the alliance will be “de-coupled”, and its future put in severe danger.

The threat of this occurring is particularly pronounced under the current US administration. Similarly unpredictable as the North Korean regime, the Trump administration and its “America First” banner raise the prospect of a US’s distancing from the alliance, particularly in the event of a possible nuclear attack on American soil.

This would bring Japan (and South Korea) to consider possible options for defence. One possibility is the allocation of US tactical nuclear weapons to Japan and South Korea, a topic which is debated in South Korea but less so in Japan. Such action could be seen as a strengthened US commitment to nuclear deterrence and protection, but also raises the prospect of it becoming a target for North Korean missiles. Even though some politicians consider this option a viable form of deterrence, the

government in Japan has no plan of breaking the self-imposed “Three Non-Nuclear Principles”, which include: not possessing, not producing and not permitting the import of nuclear weapons.

Another option could be the development of independent nuclear capabilities for Japan and South Korea. This action is a clear violation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and has not been debated beyond academic theory, but when push comes to shove, may still become an option.

A third concern includes the potential for a mass exodus from North Korea if hostilities break out with the United States (and/or South Korea or Japan). While most flows would go to China and South Korea, it is also possible that a part would cross to Japan. The border with South Korea is heavily militarized and would probably be a frontline. The border with China is also heavily protected given Chinese measures implemented in anticipation of such eventualities. Thus, it is possible that many people would take the risk and sail to Japan.

There is some evidence to support this case. A number of small wooden boats, often without sufficient equipment, have arrived on Japan’s shores. Some crewmembers have been arrested for stealing and vandalizing coastal infrastructure. This proves that North Koreans can risk crossing the Sea of Japan and given the stretched and unprotected coastlines, there will be little means to prevent a massive inflow of refugees.

A further Japanese concern stemming from a potential conflict on the Korean Peninsula is its impact on Chinese power and presence in the region. If a conflict were to erupt, China may not intervene as it did in the 1950s. However, China is very concerned about losing a buffer state. China may therefore try to maintain influence and establish a puppet state in North Korea.

China may also seek to stretch its military front into the Korean Peninsula, increasing the possibility of confrontation with the US. This would impact the South Korean-US alliance. Given South Korean economic dependence on China, this extension of Chinese influence would make Seoul more inclined to cooperate with Beijing than Washington.

Ever-increasing Chinese influence in the South and East China Sea and the emerging influence of China over the Korean Peninsula would certainly change the dynamics of the security environment in the region. Knowing the reluctance of the United States to confront China militarily, the extension of Chinese power would put Japan in a difficult dilemma: increase its defence capability or balance China and the United States.

The North Korean threat does not only translate into the threat of military conflict or a refugee crisis but is also damaging Abe's credibility in relation to the abductee issue. Prime Minister Abe has made his name by taking a strong position against North Korea on the at least 17 Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea in the 1970s and 1980s, a number one priority

among his supporters. Thus, it has been and will always be difficult for the administration not to produce some result on this issue. Discussing the issue now is extremely difficult, however, with everyone's attention on the nuclear and missile threat. Although president Trump took up the abductee issue in his speech at the UN General Assembly and met with the families of abductees when he visited Japan, the possible solution of this matter is miles away under the current circumstances.

Considering the heightened uncertainty affecting Japan's security interests since Kim Jong-un took power, Japan is not open to a dialogue with North Korea unless particular conditions are met. The deal has to be concluded under a certainty that North Korea will not break its promises, which requires accountability and the means for punishment if commitments are broken. Japan believes that the dialogue has to come when North Korea is giving in from pressure.

Ultimately, North Korea presents a critical threat to Japan because it raises important questions on Japan's security, relationship with allies and even Abe's own political credibility. In the face of the complexity of the current situation in North East Asia and with North Korea, the only strategy Japan will pursue, and encourage others to follow, is to sanction North Korea until it yields to Japan's conditions concerning its nuclear program and abductees. Japan cannot afford dialogue for dialogue's sake.

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