

Japan's North Korea Strategy: Dealing with New Challenges

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Introduction

In December 2013, while North Korea's Kim Jong Un regime was purging Jang Song Thaek, Japan's Shinzo Abe administration established a National Security Council (NSC) and released Japan's first-ever National Security Strategy (NSS) as well as the administration's National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG). In the two years since the start of the Kim Jong Un regime, North Korea has strengthened its missile and nuclear capabilities, institutionalized its status as a nuclear weapons state, and maintained a belligerent military posture toward the United States, South Korea, and Japan. Despite the regime's occasional signals of openness to dialogue, these events and the purge of Jang reaffirm that the new regime in Pyongyang is another extension of its two predecessors.

Meanwhile in Northeast Asia, China's economic, political, and military rise has been affecting the balance of influence on the Korean peninsula, requiring Japan to review its strategy for North Korea. While China has begun to mitigate the possibility of instability in North Korea by toughening its stance on the latter's missile program and nuclear adventurism, it has also intensified its "charm offensive" toward South Korea. The so-called South Korea–China "honeymoon," although limited, and the ongoing deterioration of the political and diplomatic atmosphere between Japan and South Korea due to history issues, add other challenges to Japan's strategy for North Korea.

With those challenges in mind, this paper aims to recalibrate Japan's existing policy toward North Korea in light of Japan's new national security strategy. The paper suggests several policies that could contribute to strengthening the Japan-U.S. alliance and Japan-U.S.–South Korea trilateral security cooperation in the future.

Japan's Security Policy for North Korea and Emerging Challenges

The issues concerning North Korea have continued to be a challenge for Japan's current policy and future strategy toward Pyongyang, particularly due to the new regime's belligerent behavior.

New Developments in North Korea

Nearly two years have passed since Kim Jong Un succeeded his father and developments thus far

¹ The views in this draft are solely the author's and do not reflect those of the National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS).

indicate that the nature of the regime and of the tenuous security situation on the Korean peninsula will remain the same. First, after the launch of the advanced *Taepodong II* in December 2012 and the third nuclear test in February 2013, North Korea has articulated “a new strategic line on carrying out economic construction and building nuclear armed forces simultaneously.”²

North Korea says this new strategic line is consistent with Kim Il Sung’s strategic line on achieving economic development and national defense simultaneously. In short, Kim Jong Un reiterated that his regime would continue to seek both nuclear weapons and economic prosperity.

Second, North Korea appears to have formulated its first-ever nuclear doctrine. The Supreme People’s Assembly passed a law that consolidates North Korea’s position as a nuclear weapons state for self-defense. While the law reiterates several of North Korea’s previous positions—that the country’s nuclear weapons are “not negotiable with the U.S.” and serve as a deterrent against the United States—the law also involves several items regarding the Supreme Commander’s decision to use nuclear weapons, no first use, management of nuclear material safety, management of nuclear weapons safety, disarmament, and so on. The law may only be an initial preparation for putting forward a more advanced nuclear doctrine in the future. North Korea already stated its status as a nuclear weapons state in the country’s revised constitution in April 2012, and the new law can be seen as part of North Korea’s institutionalization of that status.

Third, in addition to this declaratory policy, North Korea’s move toward the resumption of activities at the nuclear facility in Yongbyon indicates that Pyongyang’s determination to maintain its nuclear program is irreversible.

Fourth, regarding North Korea’s missile development and activities, Japan and other nations have several concerns. The first is North Korea’s development of mid-range *Rodong* missiles that could reach Japan. In addition, North Korea’s untested *Musudan* missiles are a growing source of worry among Japan, South Korea, and the United States, not only because the missile’s range could allow it to target South Korea, Japan, and Guam but also because it can be launched from mobile launchers and is difficult to detect. Thus, Japan, the United States, and South Korea now have another security concern that Pyongyang can take advantage of in dealing with its three adversaries.

Fifth, North Korea’s consolidation of its position as a nuclear weapons state and its provocative and hostile behavior have prompted China to increase its pressure on North Korea, though in a restrained way. The pressure seems to have pushed North Korea to seek dialogue with South Korea, the United States, and Japan. However, as usual, China’s limited use of its leverage has not yet made North Korea fully forthcoming.

As for North Korea–China relations, North Korea has long depended on China for economic assistance, and its trade dependence has been increasing continuously. While China is unlikely to

² "Report on Plenary Meeting of WPK Central Committee," Korea News Service, March 31, 2013, <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2013/201303/news31/20130331-24ee.html>.

pressure North Korea to the extent of destabilizing the Kim regime, China has recently been tougher on North Korea and has used both political and economic/financial levers in the wake of the regime’s nuclear test and missile launches. Regarding the purge of Jang Song Thaek, China has officially maintained the principle of noninterference in North Korea’s domestic affairs. Even so, China has expressed more explicit concern about North Korea’s provocations.

These developments indicate that the Six-Party Talks have become even less effective, and that the prospect for any substantial international dialogue with North Korea on denuclearizing is still dim. Any word or deed that makes North Korea believe that its status as a *de facto* nuclear weapons state is acknowledged would further embolden North Korea.

Japan’s Security Policy for North Korea

In Northeast Asia, the Korean peninsula and the Taiwan Strait have long been Japan’s two most important geostrategic locations, with the stability of each having direct ramifications for Japan’s security. These two locations have likewise been recognized as vital to Japan in the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty. Given this, maintaining and advancing peace and security in those two areas and beyond in Northeast Asia remains an essential part of Japan’s core security interests.

Japan has based its North Korea policy mainly on the 2002 Pyongyang Declaration, which utilizes “pressure (or deterrence) and dialogue” to address the highly prioritized abduction issue along with missile and nuclear concerns (see Table 1). Japan has expressed its determination to bring those issues to a complete resolution. To do so, the Abe administration has been trying to enhance strategic communications with North Korea while retaining a solid deterrence posture against its military provocations.

Table 1: Framework of Japan’s Existing Policy Response to North Korea’s Belligerence

Pressure/Deterrence	Dialogue
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Japan’s own response and denial capabilities • Japan-U.S. alliance-based cooperation, including Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) • Japan-U.S.–South Korea Trilateral Security Cooperation • Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) • Economic/Financial Sanctions (UN/Individual) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bilateral: Japan–North Korea direct talks • Multilateral: Six-Party Talks

Japan’s “pressure” on North Korea has been focused on deterrence by denial, which involves ballistic missile defense (BMD), maritime security, and full cooperation with the United States. The pressure approach also includes deterrence by punishment in the form of restrictions on nonmilitary trade and financial sanctions. North Korea’s launch of long-range missiles in 2009 led the prime minister’s security advisory group and Japanese policymakers in the major political parties to forge a consensus in favor of punitive measures including striking the adversary’s bases.

Japan aims to develop its own capability to deal with North Korea's missile threats, a point that will be discussed in great detail later.

Japan's threat perception of, and policy direction toward, North Korea are basically consistent. In fact, regarding North Korea's ballistic missiles, the NSS states:

North Korea's ballistic missiles development, including those with ranges covering the mainland of the US, along with its continued attempts to miniaturize nuclear weapons for warheads and equipping them to ballistic missiles, substantially aggravate the threat to the security of the region, including Japan. These concerns pose a serious challenge to the entire international community from the viewpoint of the non-proliferation of WMD and related materials.³

The NSS also articulates Japan's North Korea strategy as follows:

With regard to the issues of North Korea, Japan will cooperate closely with relevant countries to urge North Korea to take concrete actions towards its denuclearization and other goals, based on the Joint Statement of the Six-Party Talks and relevant UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolutions. Concerning Japan-North Korea relations, Japan will endeavor to achieve a comprehensive resolution of outstanding issues of concern, such as the abduction, nuclear and missile issues, in accordance with the Japan-North Korea Pyongyang Declaration. In particular, it is the basic recognition of Japan that normalization of relations with North Korea will not be possible without resolving the abduction issue. Japan will make every effort to realize the safety and prompt return of all abductees at the earliest possible date, investigate the truth regarding the abductions, and transfer those who executed the abductions.⁴

Thus, Japan's basic policy direction and framework for North Korea have persisted for the past 12 years, and in the meantime, North Korea's missile and nuclear capabilities have only progressed. At the same time, China's economic and military rise has affected the balance of influence on the Korean peninsula.

The Emerging Challenges

The new developments within the North Korean regime and China's tactical adjustments regarding its policies toward both North and South Korea have produced more challenges than opportunities for Japan's existing North Korea policy.

First, North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities have progressed and tools for provocations have increased, including assets for conducting cyberattacks. The Japan-U.S. alliance's main focus has been North Korea's ballistic missile threat. The alliance's BMD program has been updated

³ Japan's National Security Strategy, 2013, 25, <http://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/131217anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

accordingly to respond to North Korea's heightened capability and technological progression. Japan has always been under the threat of North Korea's *Rodong* mid-range ballistic missile. With the rapid progress of North Korea's missile capability, the United States and Japan are forced to accelerate their cooperation to advance the quality of their BMD systems. In the wake of North Korea's third nuclear test in February 2013, the United States decided to deploy a second TPY-2 radar to Japan. Both Japan and the United States agreed to promote this plan. Japan and the United States also already agreed to upgrade the Guidelines for Defense Cooperation to include space and cyberspace security by the end of 2014. These are encouraging developments in the context of the Japan-U.S. alliance, but Japan needs to move even faster to improve its own defense capabilities.

Second, with China rising in both economic and military dimensions, North Korea's material dependence on China is increasing rapidly. By now, it is clear that China puts pressure on North Korea when it thinks it needs to, but China will not destabilize the North Korean regime. Also, despite South Korea's opposition to China's sudden and unilateral announcement of an East China Sea air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in November and the Japan-ROK naval exercise in December 2013, history issues between Japan and South Korea have led to a closer relationship between China and South Korea. These developments demonstrate that Japan has to reevaluate the best means to improve security cooperation with South Korea.

Third, a related challenge is the political limitations on Japan-South Korea security cooperation that have affected Japan-U.S.-South Korea trilateral security cooperation. Given North Korea's continued military development, especially in advanced missile capabilities, the need is increasing to deepen the linkage between the Japan-U.S. alliance and the U.S.-South Korea alliance, especially in the area of BMD.

Additional Policy Proposals for Japan

Thus, Japan's North Korea strategy has been consistent and stable for the past 12 years, but because of the growth of North Korea's military capabilities as well as China's rise and its influence on the Korean peninsula, Japan has to make necessary tactical adjustments. As mentioned at the outset, Japan has established a National Security Council (NSC) and released a National Security Strategy (NSS) and new National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG). These moves, including the decision to strengthen the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force's *Aegis* system, indicate Japan's will to continue its own security efforts. However, there are several other issues Japan should address swiftly.

Enhance Deterrence / Extended Deterrence

1. *Solve the issue of Japan's collective self-defense right.* First, Japan should solve the long-overdue issue of the collective self-defense right in which Japan has maintained that the nation has that right but cannot exercise it because of constitutional constraints. This issue can be solved either by changing the Liberal Democratic Party's existing interpretation of the right or through constitutional revisions. The latter will be time-consuming. From the viewpoint of

strategic efficiency, an interpretational change is more desirable. The United States, Japan's most important and only formal ally, has been kept waiting for a long time, so the sooner the better.

Japan's resolution of this issue should be welcomed by South Korea as well. Since the mid-1990s, Track 2 security experts in Japan and South Korea have discussed the issue intensively and have even conducted simulations in the wake of North Korea's conventional and nuclear threats. These discussions and exercises have helped leading South Korean security intellectuals to understand the importance of Japan having this right. There is no reason that new generations of South Korean intellectuals should be unable to understand how helpful Japan could be to supporting the U.S.–South Korea alliance, Japan-U.S.–South Korea trilateral security cooperation, and Japan–South Korea bilateral security cooperation.

2. *Enhance Japan's own response and deterrence capabilities.* Second, as briefly suggested above, Japan is trying to enhance its own capability to respond to North Korea's missile threat more effectively. The new NDPG states the following:

Based on appropriate role and mission sharing between Japan and the U.S., in order to strengthen the deterrent of the Japan-U.S. Alliance as a whole through enhancement of Japan's own deterrent and response capability, Japan will study a potential form of response capability to address the means of ballistic missile launches and related facilities, and take means as necessary.⁵

Japan is still studying such a capability, but Japan should more swiftly move to develop the capability as North Korea develops its missile capabilities rapidly. This would help further strengthen U.S. extended deterrence, including the U.S nuclear umbrella, provided to Japan.

3. *Enhance ballistic missile defense (BMD).* Third, the further enhancement of Japan's role in the U.S.-led BMD initiative will strengthen both Japan's overall defense capability and the U.S. extended deterrence, including the U.S. nuclear umbrella in Northeast Asia. In recent years, Japan has made progress in developing its capabilities to play an appropriate role in the initiative. As mentioned above, the new NDPG states that Japan will increase the current number of *Aegis* ships from six to seven and introduce PAC-3 MSE. Japan should continue these efforts to keep up with North Korean missile development.

“Dialogue” on Abduction

The Abe administration has been searching for an opportunity to reach out to North Korea regarding the abduction issue. The NSS articulates the administration's strong determination to the resolve this issue:

North Korea's abduction is a grave issue affecting Japan's sovereignty as well as the

⁵ Japan's National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2014 and Beyond, 2013, 20, http://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/2014/pdf/20131217_e2.pdf.

lives and safety of Japanese nationals. It is an urgent issue for the Government of Japan to resolve under its responsibility and a universal issue for the international community to address as a violation of fundamental human rights.⁶

The administration seems to have started some sort of strategic communications with North Korea in 2013. Even as North Korea sends positive signals to Japan on talking about this issue, its basic stance toward Japan is still very hostile. Japan needs to continue patient testing of North Korea's willingness for serious discussions. In so doing, however, Japan needs to coordinate with the U.S. and South Korea to better gather useful information inside North Korea and to prepare for more effective engagement with North Korea in the future.

Japan–South Korea Security Cooperation

Stronger Japan–South Korea security ties are essential to Japan's North Korea strategy. Japan should pursue the following to enhance its cooperation with South Korea.

1. *Maintain minimum security cooperation with South Korea.* Japan should encourage South Korea to focus on pragmatic bilateral security cooperation. Japan–South Korea political and diplomatic relations have been deteriorating, and the politicization and institutionalization of the history issue has made cooperation between the two democracies more difficult.

One positive sign is that pragmatic security cooperation between the two countries is still alive. As demonstrated in the Tables 2 and 3, Japan–U.S.–South Korea and Japan–South Korea joint naval exercises have been conducted even after the cancellation of the signing of the Japan–South Korea General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) in 2012.

In particular, the Japan–ROK joint naval exercise in December 2013 is notable symbolically given that it was conducted after China's sudden and unilateral announcement of an ADIZ in the East China Sea.

It is also clear that while Japan–South Korea joint exercises might have been restrained or conducted in a low-key way, Japan–U.S.–South Korea joint exercises appear orchestrated to fill gaps in Japan–South Korea joint exercises. This indicates that the U.S. role is important in bringing Japan and South Korea together when the political atmosphere between them is not ideal. It also demonstrates that the Japan–U.S.–South Korea trilateral is indispensable. Japan should continue to seek U.S. cooperation in this area.

⁶ Japan's National Security Strategy, 2013, 12.

Table 2: Japan-ROK-U.S. Joint Naval Exercises (Disclosed Exercises)

Date	Exercise Activities	Location
August 6, 2009	Search and Rescue (SAREX)	Hawaii
June 21–22, 2012	SAREX, inspection, etc.	South of Korean peninsula
August 8–9, 2012	SAREX, inspection, communications, etc.	Hawaii
May 15, 2013	SAREX, inspection, etc.	West of Kyushu
October 10–11, 2013	SAREX, supply, etc.	West of Kyushu
December 11–13, 2013	Shooting, inspection	Gulf of Aden

Sources: *Defense of Japan* (2005–13), Japanese newspapers, etc.

Table 3: Japan-ROK Joint Naval SAREX (Disclosed Exercises)

Date	Location
August 5, 1999	Between Sasebo and Cheju
September 12, 2002	Southwest of Tsushima
August 6, 2003	West of Tsushima
August 26, 2005	Southwest of Tsushima
June 20, 2007	East of Cheju
July 7, 2009	North of Oki Islands
November 12–13, 2011	Northeast of Tsushima
December 12, 2013	West of Kyushu

Sources: *Defense of Japan* (2005–13), Japanese newspapers, etc.

2. *Alleviate South Korea’s “G-2 Dilemma.”* Japan should help ameliorate South Korea’s “G-2 dilemma”—concerns about a U.S.-China accommodation at the expense of U.S. allies and partners in East Asia—especially given the recent discussions of a “new type of major country/great power relationship” between the United States and China. South Korea feels caught between economic dependence on China, on the one hand, and security reliance on the United States, on the other. While the U.S.–South Korea alliance has been strengthened, South Korea is also encouraging China’s charm offensive by emphasizing a “South Korea–China honeymoon” to marginalize Japan. Japan should strive to help South Korea get out of the “G2” mindset by closely working with the United States to keep South Korea on the right side of the strategic front. Toward that end, Japan should ask the United States to further articulate what it means by “operationalizing a new model of major power relations” in terms of denuclearizing North Korea. This term seems to have reinforced the G-2 dilemma in South Korea and has also kept many Japanese policy intellectuals guessing about Washington’s China policy.

3. *Sign GSOMIA and revive ACSA discussions.* Related to the previous suggestion, the new NDPG declares that Japan will make an effort to establish a foundation for closer cooperation with South Korea, for example by concluding the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) as well as an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA). Japan should keep requesting that South Korea accede to these agreements. This has been endorsed by many experts in Japan and the United States, and it cannot be emphasized enough.
4. *Shift from “common values” to “common strategic vision and objectives.”* Japan and South Korea already agreed on common values in the late 1990s; it is time for both countries to articulate a common strategic vision and common objectives. It is not too early for Japan to start working on that vision and those objectives. These objectives and vision should include the following:
- Japan and South Korea should work jointly to enhance the U.S. extended deterrent to maintain stability on the Korean peninsula and in Northeast Asia;
 - Japan and South Korea should cooperate to maintain and strengthen the U.S. presence in Northeast Asia and beyond;
 - Japan and South Korea should continue to cooperate to deter North Korea from developing and proliferating weapons of mass destruction (WMD);
 - Japan and South Korea should continue to cooperate with other U.S. allies, such as Australia, and like-minded democracies, such as India, to ensure stability in the Indo-Asia-Pacific and beyond; and
 - Japan and South Korea should cooperate to promote democracy and market mechanisms on the Korean peninsula and in Northeast Asia.

These are only basic examples that should be further developed in the future. Additionally, it would be even more encouraging if both countries began to discuss a joint security declaration between them modeled on the joint security declarations Japan and South Korea already have with Australia.

5. *Promote pragmatism over emotionalism.* Finally, Japan and South Korea should at least contain the issue of history by agreeing not to politicize the issue in the spirit of sensible pragmatism over emotionalism. There is a precedent from 2004 in which South Korea and China “contained” the issues of history by agreeing on the so-called five principles to avoid politicization.

In the case of the history between Japan and South Korea, the two countries have conducted joint studies of history from 2002 to 2005 and 2007 to 2010. The Japanese and South Korean historians involved have not made progress, but it seems better that historians and experts argue with one another than to allow political tensions to hinder pragmatic security cooperation between the two countries. From this point of view, another round of joint historical study might be useful in relieving historical emotionalism.

Japan-U.S.–South Korea Trilateral Security Cooperation

New developments in North Korea confirm the continued importance of the deterrent capabilities of the Japan-U.S. alliance and the U.S.–South Korea alliance and of direct security cooperation between Japan and South Korea. While maintaining and strengthening allied vigilance regarding North Korea’s nuclear capabilities, the three partners should enhance their intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and BMD capabilities and conduct joint training and exercises to deal with North Korea’s missile launches and other hostile activities.

One of the most potentially dangerous North Korean capabilities is its untested *Musudan* missile, whose 2,500- to 4,000-km range covers South Korea, Japan, and Guam. Responding to this problem will require closer coordination among the three partners as well as between Japan and South Korea. While U.S. extended deterrence against North Korea remains strong, North Korea’s overconfidence in its nuclear deterrence capabilities may trigger the stability-instability paradox. This suggests that in addition to trilateral cooperation, enhancing bilateral Japan-South Korea ties is necessary. In addition to the revival of the GSOMIA process and discussion on ACSA, involving South Korea in the U.S.-led BMD program would be valuable. South Korea wants to develop its own kill chain and BMD systems, but more intensive trilateral discussion on this issue would be helpful.

To date, the United States has been the only bridge connecting the Japan-U.S. and U.S.-ROK alliances. In practice, the connection between these two alliances can be seen in the form of Japan-U.S.-South Korea trilateral security cooperation in dealing with North Korea. Trilateral cooperation among Japan, the United States, and South Korea should follow the examples of the Trilateral Policy Oversight and Coordination Group (TCOG) and the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) in the 1990s. Revitalizing the senior-level trilateral policy coordination mechanism would also be useful for synchronizing the three partners’ engagement with North Korea. The TCOG was possible because of the so-called Perry Process and a comprehensive review of America’s North Korea policy. The United States should keep these examples in mind.

The fact that both bilateral Japan–South Korea and trilateral Japan-U.S.–South Korea military exercises have been conducted and defense exchanges have been maintained despite the worsening of political and diplomatic relations between Japan and South Korea indicates that Japan and South Korea know the detriments of severing security ties between the two “virtual allies,” and know that some of the fundamental parameters of defense relations should not be dictated by what is reported in the media.

In addition to sustaining various kinds of financial and economic sanctions on North Korea, the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) should also be further utilized to strengthen allied efforts against North Korea’s proliferation activities.

Cooperation among Other U.S. Allies

Finally, security cooperation among multiple U.S. allies and like-minded countries in the

Asia-Pacific would be useful for deterring North Korea's military provocations. It would also help stabilize the whole region if a contingency occurs because those allies can actually provide operational capabilities to deal with such a crisis.

The most effective form of such cooperation would be among Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the United States. These like-minded democracies are not only U.S. allies but they have bilateral joint security agreements among themselves (except for the Japan–South Korea leg). Military exercises and joint PSI initiatives by the United States and its allies could further develop the habit of cooperation among them and encourage collective balancing in Northeast Asia.

Conclusion

Japan's first-ever NSS indicates that there is no significant change in the basic direction of Japan's strategy, but this paper suggests adjusting the strategy by adding proposals for several new policy initiatives. The NSS is designed to determine Japan's strategy for the next decade, but it is supposed to be revised whenever necessary given the uncertain security environment. Japan's strategy should also be reviewed through careful observation of North Korea's behavior and the future security environment surrounding the Korean peninsula.

What is rather certain, however, is that the Japan-U.S. alliance and the Japan-U.S.–South Korea trilateral continue to be the most effective tools for Japan's North Korea strategy. Japan should continue to focus on strengthening its capabilities and roles in its security cooperation with the United States and South Korea, while also striving to enhance its own defense capabilities.

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