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# Primacy of Diplomacy and Economic Power: How Japan Counters North Korea's Nuclear Weapons and Ballistic Missile Development

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**Abstract:** Japan's response to North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs is centered on the use of diplomatic and economic pressure to compel North Korea to return Japanese abductees from North Korea and de-nuclearize the country. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has consistently promoted the use of economic coercion through unilateral and multilateral sanctions, even when the rest of the world thought that a diplomatic breakthrough was forthcoming after the Singapore Summit of 2018. Tokyo also relies on the international community, especially the United Nations, to name and shame North Korea for its erratic behavior regarding its nuclear weapons and missile development projects. Japan's defense strategy remains the combination of conventional defense and nuclear deterrence through the US alliance. Japan has also come forward with plans to deal with contingencies on the Korean Peninsula.

**Keywords:** *Japan, nuclear weapons, economic sanctions, abduction, contingency planning*

## Introduction

The development of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs has proven to be a long-term challenge for Japan. Like other countries, Japan wishes to see stability on the Korean Peninsula and promotes the use of diplomatic and economic instruments with its neighbors to achieve peace and eventual denuclearization. Yet between Japan and the rest of the world are some delicate differences. For instance, the Japanese are not quite on the same page as others about dangers of long-range ballistic missiles and, ultimately, the chance of Korean unification. Japan's concern with North Korea is not just with its nuclear and missile programs but also a variety of economic and diplomatic issues. As it stands, the Shinzo Abe administration's concern rests more with a return of remaining Japanese abductees from North Korea than a short-term "resolution" of nuclear weapons and missile issues. For this reason, Abe and his policy advisers have been reasonably skeptical about the chance of short-term rapprochement with North Korea and remained firm in their belief of the use of diplomatic pressure and economic sanctions, even when the rest of the world thought that a diplomatic breakthrough was

forthcoming after the Singapore Summit of 2018. Japan's role in the current strategic dynamics in East Asia is unquestionably critical, but also unique.

In this article, I address the question of how Japan counters North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile development programs. Investigation of this inquiry will require a discussion of the following: I start with Japan's perception of North Korean military programs and how it responds to them. Second, I explore some of the most important determinants of North Korea policy, including the abductee issue, North Korea's activities inside Japan, and economic interactions. Finally, I discuss Japan's contingency plans for crisis scenarios on the Korean Peninsula to show what the Japanese are thinking about how conflicts would unfold and how they would respond to future crises. In so doing, I point out Western literature's general dearth of Japanese analysis on North Korea. In part because of language differences, the United States seldom encounters Japanese scholars' views, especially those expressed in Japanese.<sup>1</sup> In analyzing North Korea from a Japanese perspective, I intentionally use a number of Japanese works as a means of exposing readers to what the Japanese experts have to say.

## **Japan's threat perception of North Korea**

To start with, Japanese perception of North Korea is shaped by the absence of formal diplomacy. Like the United States and South Korea, Japan is one of around 50 nations without official representation or embassy in North Korea, which has long fueled the sense of uncertainty and mutual untrustworthiness. Japan considers South Korea the only nation in the Korean Peninsula. While informal relations exist between Japan and North Korea, absence of formal channels means that Japan relies on other countries – those with official ties with Pyongyang, such as China – for communications and information. This arrangement raises the relative importance of private travelers, academics, media personnel, and independent defense analysts – those outside the government – to play a role in these functions. Thus, Japan's perception of North Korea is a creation of multiple narratives and actors.

As North Korea's military capability increased over the years, Japan's defense scholars have called for adopting a serious response. North Korea's power has grown so much that, while China's is greater than North Korea's, some think that the latter's threat is more imminent. A retired lieutenant general of the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force (JGSDF), Noboru Yamaguchi, writes that while China's rise might have both positive and negative impacts on global strategic environments, it is "North Korea (that) constitutes the paramount foreign threat to (Japanese) national security."<sup>2</sup> For this reason, Ryukoku University professor Soutetsu Ri argues that peace with North Korea cannot be taken for granted. Because he believes (back in 2011) that the United States remains preoccupied with the situation in the Middle East, the key to Korean peace remains with China as the main negotiator for stability.<sup>3</sup>

More recently, reflecting the 2017 rise in the number of missile and nuclear tests in North Korea, some experts have gone to extremes; for instance, Yoji Koda, a retired rear admiral of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF), contends that with the arrival of US President Donald Trump, there is no reason why the United States would *not* go to war with North Korea and that, accordingly, Japan needs to be prepared for it. Granted, Koda's book was published as the nuclear brinkmanship of 2017 was rising.<sup>4</sup> Yet it is somewhat alarming that this rather sensationalist and ultimately false prediction came from one of the former top naval commanders of the country. Shigeru Handa details a variety of scenarios in which North Korea and Japan would go to war. In what appears to be drawn from war game scenarios, the contingencies he explores include North Korean attacks on places like nuclear reactors and US bases in Japan, facilities that many believe are vulnerable and, once attacked, would likely force the Japanese government to evacuate citizens. He also considers crisis situations in which Japan would have to mobilize the police and private sector because Self-Defense Forces (SDF) would be too preoccupied with war-fighting with North Korea to deal with evacuation duties. Other issues he investigates include inflows of North Korean refugees into Japan once the Peninsula becomes unstable, questions about where on Japan's northwestern coasts the refugees would land and how Japan's Coast Guard (JCG) and police would respond, the likelihood of chaos in refugee camps, and even the possibility of refugee riots. Thoughts are also given to SDF's readiness for using missile defense to intercept Nodong missiles, and North Korea's potential use of guerrilla commandos and special forces inside Japan.<sup>5</sup> Japanese officials took the threats seriously enough to pass a series of national security laws, such as the National Emergency Legislation in 2003, to allow the government to take necessary actions against foreign threats, and deploy Patriot missile defense systems across Japan and *Aegis* ships on the sea to curb North Korea's aggressiveness.

In the last few years, North Korea's threats have renewed attention in Japan, after Russia and China dominated the security discourse. Russia, North Korea, and China are all nuclear powers with considerable conventional forces, but the perception of threats to Japan varied over time, possibly in the order of Russia (during the Cold War) to North Korea (in the 1990s) to China (in the 21<sup>st</sup> century).<sup>6</sup> North Korea's military threats to Japan were perceived to be limited primarily to medium-range ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons, and as a result, the Japanese are aware that North Korea can only do so much to hurt them. Most informed Japanese see North Korea's nuclear and missile programs as little more than a means of deterrence and national survival, certainly not ones to use in preemptive missions to physically attack Japan.<sup>7</sup> They also believe that North Korea's large army can be used for little other than defense in ground warfare. North Korean soldiers are too poorly fed and the armed forces short of fuel, supplies, and good weapons to wage an offensive war for a sustained period of time. North Korea's power does not match its hostile intent, and Pyongyang would not survive allied retaliation if it carried out mass attacks, even if they may initially cause tremendous damage. As

a whole, North Korea has never posed as grave a threat to the Japanese as the Soviet Union did and China does today. It has never invaded Japan nor launched a ballistic missile aimed at it. Thus, a degree of predictability exists in Japan that spares panic each time Kim Jong-un (and Kim Jong-il, previously) makes a threat of military destruction because his behavior, while certainly erratic, has a distinctive pattern of making threats, demanding more aid and sanctions lifted, and being silent for a few months before he repeats it. The informed Japanese are also aware that North Korea's problems are more internal than external, and more political and historical than military.

A more consequential scenario than a military strike is North Korea's "implosion." It may be precipitated by a growth of social expectations for change among North Koreans. Koichi Yonemura points to a leaked document that North Korea's inspection agency made in recent years to say that a recent rise of economic "entrepreneurs" has begun to threaten North Korea's social integrity. Designed as an educational material for inspectors, the document contained a detailed investigative account of economic "incidents" that occurred across the country between 2006 and 2009. These "incidents" included North Korean citizens stealing cultural artifacts worthy of UNESCO World Heritage status and selling them to China, as well as those who bribed military officers and regional government officials to develop gold mine projects. What they have in common is the demonstration of a high level of individual motivation to ignore law and regulations to become rich. Yonemura may have exaggerated a bit when he says that these bandits (sic) are becoming "mainstream" in North Korea because they present an "exemplary" way of living through black-market operations,<sup>8</sup> but this revelation is one of the recent reminders of potential instability coming from economic change.

The second course of "implosion" is a rebellion of mid-level military officers seeking to displace the Kim Jong-un regime. A number of Japanese analysts argued in the late 1990s along this line; North Korea's *juche* (self-reliance) economy was failing, a famine was devastating people's lives, and the armed forces were in a shamble,<sup>9</sup> a situation ripe for some kind of internal revolt. There is some ground to think this may happen even now. This rebellion scenario has been explored in various degrees by foreign observers, including those in Japan. According to a 2016 NHK documentary, a leaked USB created by North Korea's 3<sup>rd</sup> Army Unit 235 indicated how low the morale was in North Korean forces and how much anger had developed toward Kim Jong-un.<sup>10</sup> Although several coup attempts have been made and suppressed in North Korea, a successful one in the future would unleash a range of humanitarian troubles in and around the Peninsula, including displacement, forced migration, and unintended launch and proliferation of nuclear arsenal. These events would generate or accompany a political vacuum in the country, potentially leading to a short-term foreign occupation by China, Russia, South Korea, or UN forces. With thousands of refugees crossing the sea and land for asylum, Japan would be among the nations forced to take them in for an unforeseen period of time.<sup>11</sup> If that happens, many SDF branches would be mobilized to contain

the impact: JMSDF to work with JCG to rescue refugees offshore while watching for clandestine boats and submarines; Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF) to provide supply and reconnaissance flights in addition to carrying out routine defense functions; and JGSDF to work with national and local police to set up refugee camps and protect local residents from them. Humanitarian resources needed for these duties would take away a large amount of resources for Japanese national defense. As Andrei Lankov famously argues, an implosion would come suddenly and violently.<sup>12</sup>

As of February 2019, the likelihood of this scenario is not great because Kim Jong-un has tightened his control of society and military by systemic coercion, execution of his lieutenants, and widespread indoctrination and propaganda. Accordingly, the Japanese are not losing sleep. Waseda University professor Toshimitsu Shigemura argues that North Korea will not “fall” anytime soon because the leadership in Pyongyang, even from the time of Kim Jong-il, has consolidated its grip on society by capitalizing on foreign criticisms and economic sanctions as a justification to tighten control.<sup>13</sup> The economic situation may not be so bad as often described. Yoji Gomi looks at a rare bright aspect of economy that may become stable in the near future. He argued in 2018 that “market economy is spreading in North Korea. Capitalists have spread into society to drive taxicabs and run real estate. North Korea has made money through selling giant statues of national leaders to African nations. While Kim Jong-il sometimes got the country into famine and financial problems, his son has been doing relatively well. North Korea is far from collapse.”<sup>14</sup> Yet others see things differently. The director of the Tokyo-based Korea International Institute, who graduated from the (North) Korea University in Japan, Toojin Park argues that Kim Jong-un’s policy of combining economic development with nuclear weapons development is inherently incompatible and unsustainable. With a series of expensive nuclear and missile tests conducted over the years, Park asserts that there is no way for North Korea to sustain a high economic growth for long with so much investment in military affairs. While some appreciate Kim’s ability to keep the political status quo, analysts like Park are more pessimistic about the future stability of the regime.<sup>15</sup>

The other threat assessment that observers consider relates to the possibility of infiltration by special forces. National police argue that North Korean special forces have more than 100 targets on the list of important defense facilities, including nuclear facilities, oil refineries, national telecommunication routes, electrical substations, bullet trains, subway systems, and major bridges. 34 nuclear facilities are located on the western coast of Japan, such as Niigata prefecture, where North Korean agents have landed and operated before.<sup>16</sup> This sense of vulnerability comes in part from the police knowledge of specific locations where over a dozen Japanese citizens were likely abducted by North Korean agents in the 1970s, which is reinforced by several other cases of attempted infiltrations of the past. Atsushi Miyata, who worked on Chinese and North Korean affairs while in JASDF, points out that in 2013, for instance, a North Korean agent who

had successfully naturalized in Japan had applied for jobs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Public Safety Intelligence Agency before being turned down.<sup>17</sup>

The fear of infiltration has manifested itself in recent events. Katsuhisa Furukawa, who served on the Panel of Experts of the United Nations Security Council on Economic Sanctions on North Korea and authored bestselling books on the topic of North Korea, quotes his colleague at the UN, allegedly a former CIA analyst, as saying that “Japan is full of those associated with North Korea.”<sup>18</sup> Although it is not entirely clear what “associated with North Korea” means, this remark resonates with the fact that Kim Jong-il (not Kim Jong-un) used to tell Kenji Fujimoto, the famous sushi chef who “returned” to North Korea in 2016 to open a Japanese restaurant (called *Takahashi*) in Pyongyang, that “Japan’s naval police is weak. North Korea’s submarines have gone to Japan many times undetected. . . . SDF should do a better job. Japan’s an island nation; it should defend itself better.”<sup>19</sup> The sentiment – that there are so many North Korean agents not just in Japan, but also across Asia, looking to undermine Japan’s security – is shared among observers; soon after Kim Jong-nam’s assassination in Kuala Lumpur in 2017,<sup>20</sup> a team of Mainichi Shinbun journalists published a detailed study of how that internationally-executed assassination happened. This is not only because there are over 150 nations with formal diplomatic ties with North Korea, but also because it is widely known that North Korean agents are in Southeast Asia, such as Malaysia and Singapore, where they are suspected to operate relatively freely because those countries did not require visas for North Korean citizens until recently.<sup>21</sup>

## **Response toward North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs**

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), Japan’s policy toward North Korea is as follows: “Japan seeks to normalize its relations with North Korea, in accordance with the Japan-Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) Pyongyang Declaration, through comprehensively resolving outstanding issues of concern such as the abductions, nuclear and missile issues as well as settlement of the unfortunate past.”<sup>22</sup> In the 2002 Pyongyang Declaration, both sides pledged to abide by international law, cooperate for peace, and not to threaten each other, among other things. While North Korea agreed to extend moratorium on missile tests before it was later breached, Japan apologized for wartime acts and offered economic and humanitarian aid as appropriate after normalization. In sum, the declaration was aimed to improve the bilateral relationship, consider international environment, and use economic incentives to solve military problems. Although the statement does not mention military instruments of policy, Japan’s military response toward North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs is substantial.

As such, Japan’s defense strategy remains the combination of conventional defense and nuclear deterrence through the US alliance. On one hand, Japan has improved its

conventional defense capability through the deployment of Patriot Advanced Capability (PAC) systems and stronger cooperation between JMSDF and JCG. JASDF has deployed PAC-3 batteries at various bases in order to shoot down any incoming medium-range ballistic missiles from North Korea. The Ministry of Defense is looking into deploying *Aegis Ashore* systems in Akita and Yamaguchi Prefectures in the near future. With the existing fleet of JMSDF *Aegis* ships, these systems are primarily designed to defend against and deter attacks coming from countries like North Korea. Despite the growing arsenal of advanced weapons, however, political efforts remain stalled with regard to revising the peace constitution, especially its Article 9, which bans the use of force as a means of settling international disputes. Thus, severe legal constraints remain on the use of material capability, even if the latter has been growing over the years. On the other hand, the US-Japan security alliance remains the center of Japan's overall defense policy, including one toward North Korea. America's extended nuclear deterrence adds much power to Japan's overall intent to deter North Korea from launching first strikes. The bilateral cooperation worked well during President Barack Obama's Asia rebalance strategy, although the strategy had elements that provoked countries like China to aggressively respond to the changing balance of military power between China and the United States.<sup>23</sup>

In the meantime, Japan's defense strategy toward North Korea does not officially involve cyber deterrence or preemption; the fact that, despite the imminence of cyber threats, Japan has yet to embrace a tough cyber measure against North Korea may come as a surprise because North Korea is one of the nations allegedly tied to hacking groups, such as the Lazarus Group, also known as Hidden Cobra.<sup>24</sup> The reason for this lack of evident intervention is that, like many other countries, Japan has been careful to take enough time to develop a cyber strategy. Accordingly, there is little public information available about Japan's cyber strategy tailored toward North Korea.

Japan's response to North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs has much to do with the use of diplomatic and economic pressure to compel North Korea to return the abductees and de-nuclearize. Prime Minister Abe has consistently promoted the use of economic coercion through unilateral and multilateral sanctions, even during the recent attempt by South Korea and the United States for a rapprochement with North Korea. A number of academics support the use of economic sanctions.<sup>25</sup> Tokyo also relies on the international community to name and shame North Korea for its behavior, especially at the United Nations.

All these considerations point to the uniqueness of Japan's response to North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs. It is not just North Korea's nuclear weapons and missiles that shape it, but external elements that could become internal vulnerabilities, such as kidnapping of citizens and Special Forces infiltration. Naturally, Japan's response is closely linked with various constituents of domestic politics whose voices and concerns have affected policy one way or another. As such, a key part of

bilateral contention remains centered on the discussion about those internal factors.

## **Domestic determinants of Japan's North Korea policy**

Because internal determinants of North Korea policy are too many to be fully examined in this limited space, I selectively discuss some of the most important ones – leadership analysis, the abductee issue, operations of ethnic Korean political groups, and economic interactions. First, Japanese officials formulate policy based on what they expect the leadership in Pyongyang will do in light of the history of the two countries, economic interactions, and directions of international politics. The Japanese commonly collect information on various aspects of Korean politics and society and have written many books on leadership analysis of this kind. In particular, personality analysis on Kim Jong-un has much to do with a series of speculations about his past and present.<sup>26</sup> Along with Kim Jong-un's closeness to individuals like Fujimoto and the fact that his mother was born in Japan, Japanese observers tend to draw a sense of comfort that he will not order a military strike on Japanese soil under normal circumstances. Generally, the Japanese see Kim to be a cold-blooded but rational actor with a decent degree of strategic restraints and ability to conduct reasonable cost-benefit analysis. Thus, while Japan continues to strengthen its defense, it pays much attention to its bigger strategic rival in China.

Second, Japan's policy towards North Korea is based on a years-long commitment to returning home the abductees, whose resolution is now one of the major conditions for diplomatic normalization with North Korea. The abductee issue has been one of the reasons why Japan has firmly opposed deals with North Korea over missiles and nuclear weapons and continued to push for economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation. The abductee issue is so central to the interests of political heavyweights at home, especially Abe, who became prime minister after championing the issue in front of his predecessor (Koizumi), that some experts propose to make drastic compromises with North Korea as a means of solving it. One such expert, the late diplomat Hisahiko Okazaki, proposed to give North Korea 50 tons of rice in exchange for repatriation, assuming that the kidnapped were still alive then.<sup>27</sup> The abductee issue became prominent in 2002 when Kim Jong-il met with Prime Minister Koizumi in Pyongyang. It has since become a "must discuss" issue in negotiations with North Korea, arguably stalling multilateral discussions like the six-party talks, but reflecting a key aspect of Japanese politics. The main lobby group, called the Association of Families of Victims Kidnapped by North Korea (AFVKN, or "Sukuukai" in Japanese), has made the resolution one of Abe's (but not necessarily his successors') conditions for normalization. With the press mostly on their side, the groups' members have repeatedly met not only with prime ministers, but also Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump to make a case for the return of abductees. There has been no breakthrough in their effort in recent years, but the lobby

continues to shape a hardline approach in Abe's policy.

The third determinant of North Korea policy is the role of ethnic North Korean residents in Japan and their organizations, such as the Chongryon, or "Chosen Soren" in Japanese. North Koreans with permanent residency in Japan are an important source of intelligence from which to draw a political "temperature" in North Korea. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs reports that as of June 2014, there were as many as 537,000 Koreans, including North Koreans (but excluding those who naturalized), registered as living in Japan,<sup>28</sup> especially in major cities with large North Korean populations and Korean towns, like Tokyo, Kawasaki, and Osaka. The history of ethnic repatriation to North Korea is long,<sup>29</sup> with a number of ethnic Koreans returning home to North Korea on a weekly basis, but many others remain in Japan. While Korean people in Japan have long been targets of nationalist attacks, most of them remain largely apolitical groups of people and have merged into Japanese society through commerce and marriage.

In contrast, political groups like the Chosen Soren have been clandestinely active and have caused controversy in recent years by, for instance, demanding a government subsidy for operating its schools (such as the aforementioned North Korean University in Japan) where anti-Japan education is allegedly provided. With close ties to Pyongyang, the group organized itself from North Korean residents in search of eliminating discrimination and improving the quality of Korean life in Japan. The Chosen Soren and its associated organizations also promote understanding about and support for North Korea by inviting legislators, regional politicians, and famous people to social events.<sup>30</sup> However, this group is hardly immune from critique, not only from Japanese observers for problems ranging from alleged espionage to indoctrination and tax evasion, but also even those from within. Kwang Hee Han, a former Chosen Soren leader who had become vice minister of finance at its headquarters in Tokyo after 40 years of service, criticizes the group for many problems it has caused. Among other things, he revealed how the group's "study group" indoctrinates students to believe in communism, teaches them how to operate as spies against South Korea, and makes money operating gambling industries like pachinko.<sup>31</sup>

The last domestic determinant of North Korea policy, which is tied to a policy outcome of sanctions, is economic interactions. I focus on domestic aspects of economic interactions for two reasons. First, North Korea's economic capacity shapes its behavior toward the Japanese and therefore affects the way the two countries interact economically. Second, Japan uses both economic sanctions and potentiality of financial aid as a means of getting North Korea to change policy for the better. Japan and North Korea used to engage closely on economic terms, even though economic interactions brought little benefit for the Japanese. For Japan, North Korea has never been a large trading partner, and Tokyo severed official trading ties with Pyongyang in 2010.<sup>32</sup> For North Korea, Japan is a key economic actor to buy goods and supplies from, and commerce used

to give them some of the best nutrition and most advanced technologies. But for the Japanese side at least, economic instruments are an important part of its policy. This is clear from a historical standpoint; Japan used to export such manufactured goods as transport materials, while importing foodstuffs like mushrooms and seafood. In those days, North Korean commercial ships used to come to Japan on the famous cargo passenger ferry named *Man Gyong Bong 92* that served as a symbol of bilateral trade for decades. The ferry operation was criticized for allegedly being part of shipping illicit materials and eventually shut down in 2006 by the Japanese government due to Kim Jong-il's launching of missiles and nuclear tests. Japan stopped trade in 2010 and has since stuck mostly with multilateral economic sanctions. It remains true, however, that North Korean travel bureaus in Japan continue to give travel visas to ordinary Japanese citizens who are willing to pay for travel and, in so doing, technically contribute to the regime's finance, before they return to Japan to do things like writing travel books.<sup>33</sup>

In a book in Japanese, Kyushu University professor Jongseok Park provides an academic insight on North Korea's economic performance in historical manner, showing that the North Korean economy used to be closed, but once it realized that economic development was impossible to achieve as long as North Korea worked only with socialist nations, it began to seek better relations with the capitalist world, especially since the end of the Cold War. In light of the collapse of the socialist order, however, North Korean authorities became careful about moving ahead too quickly with structural reform. Meanwhile, the private sector developed, albeit slowly. Therefore, while the North Korean economy grew with socialist cooperation, it shrank as socialist republics began to recede. In the 1990s, North Korea's economy recovered slightly, but the society soon suffered from famine. Now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, North Korean leaders have put off drastic reform in favor of raising productivity through limited opening of its economy to the outside world.<sup>34</sup>

Today, Japan has adopted a tough sanctions policy as a means of coercing Pyongyang to change behavior for the better. Yet it has also allowed ethnic North Koreans to return home permanently or visit there for family, which essentially permits a limited export of household goods. Until recently, Japan tacitly allowed North Korean shipping companies to use its ports and operate. In his 2017 book, *Financial Sources of North Korean Nuclear Weapons: Secret Records of United Nations Investigations*, Furukawa makes key revelations. While the Abe administration has been among the most vocal about the need to tighten the sanctions, Furukawa contends that Japan is one of the many countries that practically allow North Korean agents to trade illicitly. Specifically, he argues that the problem is with the lackluster nature of Japan's domestic law. For example, he shows that special measures law on freight inspection (貨物検査特別措置法) only allows the government to inspect freight that directly comes from and goes to North Korea, but does not allow the government to inspect freight that goes elsewhere (like Russia). In 2015, this law prohibited the government

from conducting full inspection of a North Korean ship docked in Sakaiminato, Tottori prefecture, because it belonged to a third country, when the government suspected it of carrying smugglers.<sup>35</sup> So legal reform is needed to do Japan's part in the execution of economic sanctions. The scale of insufficient supervision is smaller, however, compared to other countries like China, which has evidently allowed North Korea to violate international sanctions and actually conducted trade and ship-to-ship cargo transfers on the sea, especially at nighttime.

If the North Korea situation improves dramatically in the near future, some observers think that Prime Minister Abe might try to visit North Korea. Japan's *Business Journal* speculates that he would, based on a testimony of Thae Yong-ho, a former North Korean diplomat who defected in 2016 while deputy ambassador to the United Kingdom, who maintains that a diplomatic rapprochement between Japan and North Korea is possible because there are some positive signs for it in North Korea. For instance, he cites a special investigative committee designed to investigate Japanese abductees that remains intact despite North Korea's insistence that the abductee issue has been resolved (from North Korea's perspective). Thae argues that this is because Kim Jong-un wants to get massive aid from Japan in exchange for the resolution of the abductee problem.<sup>36</sup>

## Contingency planning

Japan's policy toward North Korea remains an important part of international diplomacy. Yet Japan's influence would continue to wane if outside dynamics and accidents proved more influential. Recent events, especially the 2018 Trump-Kim Summit in Singapore, demonstrate the limit of Japanese diplomacy; Prime Minister Abe was seen as largely out of the diplomatic loop while his counterparts in South Korea and China were "in." When diplomacy goes well, few are worried, until it does not go well. As such, Japanese leaders have long planned for contingency, which includes a variety of scenarios ranging from North Korea's "collapse" to conventional missile strikes. Accordingly, they have deployed missile defense, strengthened the alliance with the United States, and relaxed legal constraints on the use of force. The so-called J-Alert, a nationwide warning system designed to deal with crisis situations that include missile launches to earthquakes, is a relatively recent invention. The system became a popular target of public complaints when North Korea fired a few missiles to cause noisy alarms in the middle of the night, but people know that the problem rests with North Korea and not the system itself, which is functional.

Security loopholes remain, however. Japan's Coast Guard (JCG) has often failed to detect illegal entries of North Korean fishermen who reached the shores on Japan.<sup>37</sup> In fact, as military analyst Kazuhisa Ogawa demonstrates, JCG has long failed to defend the coastline from North Korean and Chinese encroachments.<sup>38</sup> This trend has only

intensified in recent years. JCG statistics shows that in 2017 alone, a total of 104 wooden boats have reached Japan from North Korea, in addition to 35 North Korean bodies found with them.<sup>39</sup> This is a serious national security matter because, in the case of North Korean implosion, Japan would face a torrent of refugees crossing the ocean to reach Japan, for which it is not ready. Shin'ichi Kiyotani argues that it is possible that some "refugees" may turn out to be intelligence officers trained to harm Japanese nationals once they land. JCG and JMSDF do not each have a staff size large enough to deal with tens of thousands of refugees. Even if they are able to detain some of them, there will not be enough facilities to host the refugees. Police will not have enough officers to man the facilities, so JGSDF would be mobilized to defend vulnerable facilities, which would mean less manpower for national defense. As a result, Japan would have to mobilize the private sector to provide security, facilities,<sup>40</sup> and order, but those in the private sector are not as trained and resourceful as government agencies. Ultimately, one must assume that all these scenarios could unfold after North Korea launched a mass cyberattack on Japan to significantly downgrade computer systems across the SDF.

Because of severe restrictions on the use of defense force, the Japanese government has relied on US forces as a central part of planning for contingency. Joint actions would be based on a series of existing agreements, but most importantly on the 1960 security treaty. The sections that are most pertinent to joint planning are in the treaty's Articles 4 and 5. On one hand, Article 4 states that US forces would consult with the Japanese government when they intend to make changes on combat operations affecting US bases in Japan.<sup>41</sup> Some observers naturally suspect that US forces would act without consultation in case of contingency.<sup>42</sup> As of now, there is no unclassified government document that states whether and how much US force in Japan would be used to fight a war in Korea, although a series of verbal commitments made by generations of national leaders on both sides of the Pacific all but guarantee a swift discussion being set up by joint forces at time of crisis. This is a critical alliance matter people must be aware of, but it turns out that not many studies have been done on this topic, even in Japanese. In this respect, Toojin Park's analysis of several US war plans against North Korea is a rare study in Japan, but it is done with the US Forces in Korea (USFK, 35,000 troops) playing a central role without consideration of US Forces in Japan (USFJ, 48,000 troops). To be fair, Park does mention the possible use of amphibious assault ships based at Sasebo and E-4B aircraft allegedly based at the National Airborne Operations Center at Chitose Air Base in Hokkaido, but he does not elaborate exactly how these forces would be used and for what purpose.<sup>43</sup> Park argues that in case of a bilateral US-North Korea war, North Korea would lose quickly for five reasons. First, North Korean forces are not unified enough to face stronger adversaries. Second, North Korean soldiers are too malnourished to fight. Third, its ballistic missiles cannot reach the US homeland. Fourth, North Korean conventional weapons are "useless" (sic) and there is little fuel for soldiers to use to fight. Finally, North Korea's economy is too small to fight the prosperous US forces.<sup>44</sup> The

problem with this view is that a purely bilateral war is unlikely and that a decent analysis must at least take China, South Korea, and probably Russia into consideration. There are already many war scenarios on the Korean Peninsula that scholars outside Japan have explored,<sup>45</sup> but these analyses exclude those scenarios.

On the other hand, Article 5 of the 1960 security treaty ties US forces with the defense of Japan, although the Article is written in ways that do not necessary guarantee US forces to defend Japan in *every* conceivable scenario. A highly technical reading of Article 5 shows that in fact, the Article gives Washington a considerable leeway to maneuver; it allows the US side to respond to an armed attack on Japan in the territories “in accordance with their respective constitutional provisions and processes.”<sup>46</sup> This means that, even if Japan is under attack and asks for US help, US forces will not necessarily be under obligation to intervene at the timing of Japan’s liking unless and until Congressional and legal procedure finds it in America’s interest to do so. Similarly, Article 5 does not automatically force the Japanese to act, either. This strict interpretation of the Article aside, however, Japan and the United States remain close allies, and it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which North Korea would end up splitting the alliance. Therefore, it is fair to expect both countries to operate together, although details of joint operations are likely to depend on how the crisis unfolds into a conflict.

Contingency planning remains an important matter not only because a Korean war would significantly impact Japan’s national security, but also because there are nearly 60,000 Japanese citizens living in South Korea, in addition to those traveling there. Evacuation plans for the nationals are necessary, especially ones involving SDF, not just USFJ or USFK. JASDF could be requested to fly people out of the Peninsula, while JMSDF would be tasked to sail them away to secure location. JGSDF would have to protect the aircraft on deck and ships from possible attacks and riots. It is unknown, however, whether Japan would be able to secure the South Korean government’s approval to deploy SDF to South Korea to evacuate the Japanese citizens there. It would be legal for SDF to operate outside Japan under the 2015 collective self-defense clause as long as USFJ is involved, but the problems are that (1) the evacuation operation would take place on South Korea’s sovereign land and (2) by law, SDF could only be legally mobilized to *already pacified* areas; SDF cannot be deployed to combat areas overseas without special legal measures added. Even if SDF was deployed to South Korea, the size of deployment would be politically determined, likely small, and without anything more than sidearms for SDF personnel, so SDF would not necessarily be able to deal with a large number of people – accounting realistically for not just Japanese citizens but locals, Americans, Chinese, and tourists – asking to be evacuated in the midst of chaos.<sup>47</sup>

These challenges were part of the considerations assessed in some operational plans, one of which was recently published without government sanction. According to the *Yomiuri Shinbun*, a Japanese newspaper, if North Korea’s shelling (or threats of it) close

airports in South Korea, the Japanese government would work with US forces to move affected Japanese and American citizens from Pusan to the Tsushima islands. After spending a night or two there, the evacuees would take turns to board Japanese and US ships to move to Kyushu via Moji port. The obvious problem with this plan is the possible objection from the South Korean government to temporarily host SDF personnel on South Korean grounds. To deal with the problem, JMSDF ships might consider docking next to US ships that get stationed at Pusan port, theoretically *without touching* Korean ground, in order to move the people, although such a move would likely be exposed and become highly controversial in South Korea, even in time of turmoil. Japanese officials have scouted the terrain around and on Tsushima and looked into local infrastructure on the island, such as lodging facilities, water supply, and foodstuffs. The government might soon begin consultation with local governments that could end up hosting the evacuees.<sup>48</sup>

No evacuation plans would be perfect; there are at least three issues with this plan. First, it assumes the availability of US forces and resources Japan needs, but it is possible that both forces would be so pressed that they may not be able to help each other. USFK would be mainly tasked to fight the war and move at least 200,000 American people known to be living in South Korea today, including tourists, to safer locations, a task that would involve the use of various US bases in Japan. Even this operation alone would be complicated; people would be easier to “move,” but we have to beware of an additional challenge – seemingly funny but seriously – how to deal with the need to relocate and feed hundreds of animal pets of those fleeing families, which add logistical constraints on the relocation at time of crisis.<sup>49</sup>

The second challenge is with the multinational nature of a conflict on the Peninsula, especially with regard to UN missions there. While South Korea hosts the UN Command forward presence among others, Japan hosts the United Nations Command-Rear at Yokota Air Base. In case of contingency in Korea, the rear forces may be used to conduct a number of functions at the same time, including providing support to the front line and bringing UN forces in Korea to Japan, which would be an additional logistical challenge for the Japanese. Japan could be asked to open extra SDF bases to these troops and provide medical care and other resources when government functions are overstretched. Furthermore, the UN Command and communication routes could become targets of North Korean missiles, a possibility that the Japanese government must know would cause heavy casualties.

The final concern one may have with the plan is the assumption of a fully supportive political environment in Japan for the operation. Even though North Korea's threats have been there for a long time, the reality is that most Japanese are not quite ready for war with North Korea, and the particular nature of local opposition to US and Japanese bases, including those in Okinawa, must be considered an obstacle, especially if the war expands and becomes protracted with Chinese or Russian interventions. Postwar

US presence on Okinawa has long caused many types of troubles with local hosts. US contingency preparations have made people in Okinawa, some of whom are staunch anti-base activists, aware of US plans to evacuate US troops and their families currently in South Korea to Okinawa.<sup>43</sup> Contingency planning reflects the presence of many moving parts, which makes it difficult for interested parties to conduct realistic scenario planning. As such, the planning process requires the Japanese government to reshape the domestic political environment, where USFJ would swiftly and effectively be used.

## Conclusion

The main findings of this article are as follows: First, Japan's response to North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs is a function of multiple factors and actors in Japan, not just of government officials but also of private citizens, academics, and the media. This is largely because of the lack of formal ties between Pyongyang and Tokyo, but also because these non-governmental actors have traditionally been an important part of foreign analysis. Second, Japan's concerns with North Korea are not only with the latter's missiles and nuclear weapons, but also other problems, such as the abductee issues and infiltration risks, which make it a quite complex foundation of policy formulation. The complexity also reinforces the fact that Japan's national interests are not always directly correlated with its neighbors in East Asia and the United States, largely because those countries are not necessarily apprised of all of those issues in Japan. Additional challenges come from the fact that North Korea's military threats pose problems to some different constituents, such as those in Okinawa, who do not necessarily have the same level of enthusiasm for US presence as those officials in Tokyo. All these challenges provide a set of complicated problems that Japan needs to take into consideration as it formulates and implements North Korea policy.

There are two policy implications: Japan's limited facilitation of denuclearization and the complexity of Japan's democratic system. First, while Japan remains committed to dealing with challenges related to North Korea's WMD and missile programs as a member of the international community, its ability to facilitate denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula remains limited. Japan is unlikely to go nuclear anytime soon in order to deter North Korea on the nuclear level. Nor does it generate an offensive conventional military strategy to strike North Korea's missile launchers; instead, Tokyo has made its missile defense system more robust. These limited actions have come in large part due to its heavy reliance on economic and diplomatic instruments and internal constraints on the use of force. This means, however, that as long as the international community continues to use such means in a major multilateral framework, Japan will be able to do much to contribute to the effort as a middle power.

Second, Japan's response to North Korea's nuclear and missile development programs

will always reflect multiple dimensions of a complex democratic society. As such, this article has laid out a set of key political and social organizations that have much to do with the way policymakers function. Among the most important factors is the role of the abductee issue, which has prevented the Abe administration from walking away from a hardline, maximum pressure campaign. While the abductee issue appears to be detached from North Korea's weapons programs, it continues to have a powerful impact on the way the Japanese consider North Korea and how Prime Minister Abe shapes Japan's North Korea policy. The international community must take into account the multifaceted nature of Japanese domestic politics that influence the way policy is made toward North Korea.

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Feldman, Germany's Foreign Policy of Reconciliation, 73-78.

Roehrig, "Stability or Instability?," 131.

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