

Defense Cooperation Among Japan, the United States, and the ROK: Dealing with the DPRK

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This chapter is about how Japan prepares to respond to provocations from North Korea. As background factors, we need to consider how Japan is altering its security policy, how it is assessing the capacities and intentions of the DPRK and also China, and how it is evaluating the role of China on the Korean Peninsula and of defense cooperation with the United States and the ROK. Unlike the responses of Washington and Seoul to possible provocations from Pyongyang, Tokyo is not focused on direct military involvement. It is emphasizing the broader context while recognizing its limitations in responding militarily.

In July 2014 the Japanese government decided on a fundamental change in security policy. The Shinzo Abe cabinet altered the interpretation of the Constitution, allowing Japan to exercise the right to collective self-defense even in peacetime.¹ The reason cited for this decision is a “change in the security environment” around Japan. The government emphasized a “rapid change in the global power balance,” noting that the security environment around Japan has become increasingly severe, as represented by the nuclear and missile development programs of North Korea.² Japan recognizes that a DPRK missile attack with a nuclear warhead is a major threat, but this is not the primary reason for the change in Japanese security policy. More fundamental is that the “rise of China” has created a perception of a confrontation between the United States and China in the Asia-Pacific region. Even if there is not now an equivalence of power between the two, the image of confrontation has taken root, with countries around China speaking of a “China threat.” Inside Japan, efforts are ongoing to identify both China’s military capabilities and its intentions—efforts that are proving to be quite difficult.

There are quantitative indicators of capability,³ but numbers alone do not tell the whole story. Today’s fighting capacity is also determined by intelligence gathering, based not only on systems but also on networks and big data management. It is difficult from the outside to assess the level of such capacity. Even if the capacity is there, without the intention to use it, there is no threat.

Whereas it takes a long time to build a country’s capacity, its intentions can change over a short time, even in opposite directions. Therefore, while continuing to analyze capacity, we must also pay attention to intentions and strive to deepen mutual understanding. With that in mind, Japan and China in December 2014 reopened their consultative dialogue on a “maritime communication mechanism.”⁴ Both seek to avoid unexpected collisions on the sea and in the air, or an escalation of conflict. To realize this objective they are conducting talks to establish necessary procedures. We can see from this that China is a state that seeks to avoid accidental collisions and is willing to work toward that end through discussions.

The challenge with the DPRK is different. It prefers to conceal everything, not just its military capabilities. This makes it extremely difficult to grasp its intentions. Moreover, it intentionally makes irrational moves as a way of threatening others. People grow fearful when they confront something they do not understand. Neighbors doubt that issues can be rationally resolved through direct talks; so they must be prepared in case North Korea irrationally decides to take military action, including the use of nuclear weapons. This situation forces Japan to doubt that the DPRK shares an intention to avoid military confrontation.

DEALING WITH THE DPRK AND THE ROLE OF CHINA

In this situation of not being able to understand the DPRK's intentions, Japan recognizes that a multilateral framework is the most effective way of dealing with the country. Japan, the United States, China, Russia and, naturally, the ROK are concerned with stopping the DPRK's program of developing nuclear weapons. These countries view such weapons as a matter that directly concerns their security and exerts a large influence on the regional security environment. They have tried through dialogue to stop its development of nuclear weapons, such as through the Six-Party Talks, an experience that has not gone smoothly. They talksis wereas launched after the DPRK withdrew from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), with the five other countries aligned against its hardline tactics.⁵ However, after the Six-Party Talks began, North Korea, defying criticism from international society and sanctions, continued to conduct missile launches and nuclear tests. In response to the April and May 2009 launches and tests, the UN Security Council adopted resolution 1874, which applied additional sanctions against North Korea.⁶ Afterwards, the DPRK declared that it would process highly enriched uranium, and in 2011 it revealed the existence of a plan for a light-water reactor and the operation of a uranium enrichment facility. Moreover, the DPRK, sank the *Cheonan*⁷ on March 26, 2010, and on November 23, 2010, fired on Yeonpyeong island, killing civilians as well as South Korean military personnel,⁸ going beyond threatening conduct and actually launching military attacks. Given this abnormal North Korean attitude, it became difficult to reopen the Six-Party Talks after 2008.

Despite strong opposition from neighboring states, the DPRK persists in developing nuclear weapons and missiles. Among other aims, it seeks direct dialogue with the United States and conducts missile and nuclear tests to intimidate neighboring countries. The United States and other countries have applied economic sanctions on North Korea, but if even a single country moves out of step, the sanctions will lose their effectiveness. China holds the key to whether they will work or not, since until now it has supported the DPRK. However, this was when bilateral relations were good. China has changed its attitude toward North Korea and opposes the DPRK program of developing nuclear weapons, as do the other countries. One reason is that through the proliferation of nuclear weapons the regional security environment would be destabilized. But what also worries China is that in case of Korean reunification, a united Korea will not necessarily limit itself to maintaining an alliance with China. China will not permit a state to have nuclear weapons so close to its borders.

China wants North Korea to act as a buffer zone between it and the United States. Destabilization within the DPRK is, therefore, not desirable, as it could exert an influence directly on China. Conditions could arise where starving North Korean troops cross the border, stealing the livestock and grain kept by Chinese farmers. When after the death of Kim Jong-il on December 17, 2011, a fierce power struggle appeared possible, and the political situation in the DPRK became unstable, China sent PLA troops to the border to stand guard.⁹ And in 2013, when the new leader, Kim Jong-un, executed Jang Song-thaek, the number two figure in the regime and his uncle-in-law, China's leadership dispatched as many as 300,000 troops to the tense Sino-DPRK border.¹⁰ This was because deepening instability in North Korean society resulting from the power struggle was recognized as a negative influence that would extend to China. However, it is extremely difficult to correctly understand what occurs inside North Korea, leading to various speculations regarding the execution. China is

definitely not thinking about directly confronting the U.S. military on the Korean Peninsula. This is why China has always supported the DPRK, even though other countries—led by the United States—have criticized this approach. Limited as China's influence may be at present, it is the only state that can influence North Korea's policy decisions. The reality, though, is that China has not intentionally left North Korea to fend for itself; it has simply been unable to control events there.

Kim Jong-un has not yet paid a visit to China, which has presumably become irritated by the young leader's behavior. Some Chinese officials say that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) would no longer defend the DPRK if a military clash were to break out between it and the ROK and the United States. Chinese society is less inclined to support the dispatch of Chinese soldiers. China may need North Korea as a country, but it is not concerned about protecting any particular leader. When China joined the economic sanctions, their effectiveness was greatly enhanced; the reduced export volume of oil to the DPRK was particularly damaging, for which China took credit. However, North Korea recognizes that China is not hostile. It knows that China will not drive it into a corner, and China will continue to take steps so that North Korea is not destabilized. A China that is trying to control North Korea through economic sanctions may not be a reliable partner, but it continues to be a useful partner. This means that China has a major role to play on the matter of North Korea's development of nuclear weapons, but its influence over the transformation of that country will be limited.

THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE AND JAPAN

The two sides of the peninsula have not yet concluded a peace treaty, and this means that the Korean War has not ended. North Korea repeatedly asserts that if there is no agreement to end hostilities, military actions will continue to be taken against South Korea. ROK forces are modernized and well-equipped. Their capability is high enough to win a conventional war with the DPRK. But nuclear weapons are the choice of the weak, and they give Pyongyang bargaining power. Mao Zedong had also focused on developing nuclear weapons when the PLA was not strong enough, recognizing that only nuclear weapons could serve as a bargaining chip against the superpowers.

The United States, along with South Korea, demonstrates its intention not only to prepare for a military assault by North Korea but to fight against it if the DPRK should employ nuclear weapons. The joint U.S.-ROK military exercises are effective as a means to make this intention clear. North Korea intensely expresses its opposition each time these exercises are conducted, which stems from its understanding of the significance of the presence of the U.S. military. Of the countries active in Northeast Asia, only the United States can act as a deterrent against North Korea. Even now, North Korea provocatively threatens to launch missiles and test nuclear weapons. These "madman tactics" are the only way it can attract the attention of the United States, but one should not make light of such moves. In case North Korea feels excessively pressured by other countries, the chances are not zero that it would actually take aggressive action, including the launching of missiles tipped with nuclear weapons. That is the reason that China tries to maintain the economic sanctions at manageable levels. The scenario that China is most eager to avoid is the possibility that North Korea would be eliminated as a state as a result of it undertaking a military attack and then suffering military defeat at the hands of the United States and South Korea.

The United States and South Korea have limited means to deal with North Korea because they realize that there is a low possibility that the North will give up its development of nuclear weapons, but neither can they assent to such development. Of course, they do not have the option of a first strike against North Korea. In this case, there is no option but to pressure North Korea through economic sanctions and to prepare for the North's extreme reactions. Under conditions where one cannot conduct constructive negotiations with North Korea, it is necessary to prove to the North that its threats are ineffective so that it will stop thinking about taking extreme measures. To this end, the United States and South Korea, as well as Japan, must convince the North that they will cooperate closely to forge a military force that can render ineffective a North Korean attack—even one including nuclear weapons.

These countries have to march in lockstep with regard to economic sanctions and security cooperation. The U.S. and ROK navies can conduct MIOs (Maritime Interception/Interdiction Operations), which are aimed at preventing enemy smuggling by routinely boarding and checking merchant vessel traffic to make sure nothing illegal comes from or goes to the enemy. The U.S. Navy has conducted MIOs during the Iraq War and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. The former was conducted in enforcing Security Council Resolutions 661, 665, 678, and 986 and involved stopping and boarding ships transiting the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz to search for oil and weapons. U.S. naval vessels kept conducting the latter with other navies to prevent terrorists from getting weapons and ammunition and also to stop the smuggling of narcotics, which is a source of money for the terrorists.¹¹ This operation was conducted by a multinational force with the U.S. Navy at the core. Japan sent the Japan Maritime Self Defense Force (JMSDF) to the area to support anti-terrorism operations until 2010, but its operations were limited strictly to conducting replenishment at sea and intelligence.¹²

Japan sometimes follows its own diplomatic course toward the DPRK because it has its own abduction problem with that country. Especially for the Abe administration, bringing home the remaining abductees is a high-priority issue.¹³ As for military cooperation, Japan has been able to offer only limited cooperation because it is unable to take military action unless it confronts a planned, organized, large-scale military attack. This limitation is due to the constitutional interpretation the Japanese government has followed until now, which prohibits the use of military force in peacetime and is very restrictive in terms of preparing for contingencies. Even if a military conflict were to erupt on the Korean Peninsula involving the United States and the ROK, Japan would be unable to participate. However, the situation may change in the near future. Japan has begun to consider the use of the Self-Defense Forces even in peacetime, as reflected in the July 2014 cabinet decision expanding the cases under which Japan may exercise its right of self-defense. Even so, it would be difficult for Japan to play a major role in the event of an incident on the Korean Peninsula. In that case, what kind of role could Japan play in responding to North Korea through security cooperation with the United States and South Korea?

JAPAN'S NEW ROLE

Abe emphasizes the importance of security cooperation, saying, “In the current world, no nation can maintain peace and security on its own. International society expects Japan to play a more positive role for peace and security.”¹⁴ Based on this perception, he declared

that Japan would make a “proactive contribution to peace based on a spirit of international cooperation,” which has become Japan’s basic principle for international security. Actually, Japan has already offered considerable peace cooperation for the Middle East and other regions,¹⁵ but it had never spoken of supporting countries that are participating in military operations against specific terrorist groups. Japan had hitherto mainly limited its support to humanitarian assistance.

Japanese support programs differed from the approaches of most Western countries to the Middle East and fulfilled a unique and important role in preventing terrorism. Such support contributed to preventing people in vulnerable circumstances from joining terrorist groups, enabling them to develop their lives within international society. Abe promoted this changed meaning of Japanese support in his January trip to the Middle East, especially in his speech in Egypt.¹⁶ “Proactive contribution” has been interpreted to mean that Japan will take measures against terrorism, along with the United States and Western European countries, but Abe’s thinking does not necessarily correspond to that of these countries. For example, Abe has sought to establish closer ties with Russia on some matters in spite of the fact that European countries were seriously concerned about Russia’s threat.¹⁷ At conferences on security when there are discussions concerning the future of security with NATO personnel, for example, they invariably speak of the Russian threat. And in spite of the fact that the United States is seeking improved relations with China and South Korea, Abe has not necessarily prioritized these ties.

Although Japan established a National Security Council on December 4, 2013, adopted a National Security Strategy (NSS) on December 17, 2013, and announced new National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG), also on December 17, 2013,¹⁸ it is not prepared to use the SDF in peacetime. This requires further debate both among the Japanese people and in the Diet to create a law concerning a change in security policy, and many do not yet sufficiently understand the meaning of this shift.

The transformed Japanese security policy will have some effect against the DPRK and in cooperating with the United States and South Korea, giving Japan a new role. When a U.S. naval vessel that proceeds together with a MSDF vessel is subject to a missile attack, the Abe administration at the time of the incident can exercise the right of collective self-defense, which it has advocated. This means being able to fire a return missile in place of the U.S. vessel. Japan has deployed Aegis ships in order to defend against ballistic missiles fired by North Korea, for there is a real chance of North Korea firing anti-ship missiles. If the MSDF could assume the burden of anti-air warfare in place of the U.S. Navy, it could help to counter North Korean missiles. Although it cannot join in combat against North Korea on the peninsula, Japan can conduct some military operations in cooperation with the United States and South Korea at sea. Japan’s “Ship Inspection Operations Law” allows it to conduct operations in territorial waters, contiguous zones, and international waters in case of “military emergencies in areas around Japan.” The law imposes strict limitations on ship inspections, requiring a Security Council resolution and permission from the country with which the ship is registered as well as from the ship’s captain before boarding. These conditions for Maritime Interdiction Operation (MIO) are bound to limit its effectiveness, but the JMSDF can conduct Replenishment at Sea operations, for which it already has some experience during Operation Enduring Freedom, and contribute to operations by the United States and South Korea.

The new security policy would allow the JMSDF to join inspection operations. This policy, which the LDP proposed to coalition partner Komeito on February 27, 2015, allows Japan to conduct ship inspections without a Security Council resolution or permission of the country of registration or ship captain.¹⁹ Weapons can be used in order to force the ship's crew to accept the inspection. The JMSDF had already started training crews on ships and aircraft to conduct MIOs from the 1990s, learning from the U.S. Navy and Coast Guard through joint exercises. Japan does not have sufficient tracking information, which is crucial to an MIO, and must find a way to share intelligence with the United States and South Korea.

In actual naval operations, when ships are in fleet formation, it is difficult to determine which ship is the target of an attack. The commanding officer or other officer in the fleet must consider how to defend the fleet and then coordinate a response that takes into account the capabilities of each of its ships. It is unrealistic for each ship to decide on its own how to respond to an attack on the fleet. Japan's security policy can be said to allow for realistic military operations. Because the Aegis ships with which the MSDF is equipped can connect to the U.S. Navy's Aegis network, joint military action in response to a North Korean missile is easy. They can share the track/target information and the command/control/communications in the system. The Aegis system on Japanese ships, too, has already started adding the ballistic missile defense function. The U.S. Navy, with Japan's Aegis vessels, can conduct NIFC-CA (Navy Integrated Fire Control - Counter Air)²⁰ and other network-centric operations, opening systematic possibilities.

A third newly permitted behavior is information sharing, which is best achieved by sharing the C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance) system and networks. The JMSDF systems would have to be built into U.S. Navy networks. Some Japanese are worried that Japan would be drawn into a war automatically if the SDF forces and equipment are incorporated into the U.S. naval system and that room for Japan to decide on its own what it should do would be lost in the course of joint operations. Actually, this thinking is correct, because today's warfare increasingly is headed in the direction of excluding human judgment due to the rapid improvements in missile technology. There is no time to wait for such judgments in responding to an attack. Therefore, U.S. forces are promoting what is called C5ISR, originally C4ISR, in which the new "C" refers to Combat System.

The kill-chain of NIFC-CA consists of E-2C "Hawkeye" early warning aircraft, JLENS (Joint Land Attack Cruise Missile Defense Elevated Netted Sensor), CEC (Cooperative Engagement Capability), the Aegis system, and the SM-6 standard missile. An enemy missile will be detected, identified, targeted, and shot down by a decision completely within the network. In order to counter North Korean missiles, in case Japan dispatches an Aegis vessel, the most suitable position that ship occupies will be decided by the Aegis system network. In the future there is even a possibility that Japan's Aegis ships will be incorporated into the U.S. Navy's NIFC-CA, whose expansion the Navy will be testing, and it will no longer be possible for each ship to decide what to do. According to Japan's new security law, in the event of a North Korean missile attack, there is a possibility of proceeding as part of a joint operation with the U.S. Navy. Japan will have to deliberate and decide in advance of an operation how it will participate. Limiting the discussion to Japan-U.S. cooperation, however, overlooks the fact that cooperation with South Korea will also be necessary, because it is on the Korean Peninsula where an incident could occur.

JAPAN-U.S.-ROK TRILATERAL COOPERATION

Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) sees the object of collective self-defense extending to South Korea and Australia, as well as the United States. In consultations on a security law that began between the coalition partners on February 13, 2015, the LDP proposed to the Komeito party that these three countries be the object of collective defense, which recognized the reality that U.S.-Japan cooperation could lead to Japan-ROK and Japan-Australia cooperation. South Korea possesses Aegis ships as well. If these and Japan's ships were connected to the U.S. Navy Aegis network for conducting fighting operations, there would automatically be trilateral cooperation. However, incidents on the Korean Peninsula need not be limited to North Korea firing a missile. The possibility exists of military operations on land or in nearby waters. What would Japan's response be then?

The JMSDF has consistently promoted mobilization since the end of the Cold War, as in the deployment of *Osumi*-class tank landing ships and DDH *Hyuga*-class helicopter carriers, built for sending troops/vehicles immediately to an area where there is a military confrontation. They are based on intelligence anticipating situations that might arise, which is also the direction that U.S. forces are taking. JMSDF has the capability to transport land troops on the Korean Peninsula, maintaining interoperability with the U.S. Navy.

For two reasons, however, it is unrealistic that Japan would send its SDF to military operations on the Korean Peninsula should a situation arise there. First, the Japanese people are strongly opposed to dispatching the SDF to another country. Second, the Korean people are strongly opposed to Japanese forces entering their territory. It is thus unimaginable for that to happen under present circumstances. Yet, there are still situations on the peninsula that Japan could face, such as assistance for or the evacuation of its citizens. There are many Japanese living in and visiting South Korea who may need to be evacuated if North Korea attacks South Korea. The Self-Defense Force Law Article 84-3 limits the JSDF to land, maritime, and air transportation of Japanese nationals. The LDP is trying to change this to allow the JSDF to conduct rescue operations. Although the two ruling parties are discussing such evacuation operations, it is inconceivable that the government would allow the JSDF to conduct rescue operations in an armed conflict zone.²¹ Komeito is opposed to an operation that would leave Japanese dead and injured and seeks a guarantee of the safety of JSDF personnel. This would probably limit SDF involvement to evacuation operations before North Korea commences firing, even after the changes in Japanese security policy are finalized.

Given the current deterioration in bilateral relations, the possibility is low that the ROK would permit Japanese forces to enter the country. Japan would then have to ask U.S. naval vessels for protection to evacuate its citizens; however, it is unlikely that the United States would prioritize saving Japanese nationals in Korea. Therefore, Japan needs to proceed on its own to rescue them. The cooperation of the Korean government is indispensable. Whether for saving Japanese or for joint operations, Japan must first improve relations with South Korea.

To date, Japan has only considered cooperating with the United States in regard to its own security, downplaying multilateral security cooperation. Yet, as the security environment has changed, Japan must consider other options. One factor is the relative decline of U.S. influence. Not only in the event of an incident on the Korean Peninsula but also in response to events impacting Japan's security elsewhere, there is new awareness that the U.S. alliance does not suffice.

After Japan establishes its new security policy, limits on the use of the SDF will remain. Even so, it will be necessary to consider security cooperation with countries other than the United States. Especially in regard to security in the East Asian region, cooperation with South Korea is indispensable. Although the leading role of the United States in Asia-Pacific security will not change, U.S. allies will have to strengthen their relations with each other. The Japan-U.S. alliance is the nucleus of Japan's security policy, and the U.S.-ROK alliance serves a similarly important role for South Korea. These two alliances provide favorable conditions for security cooperation between Japan and South Korea, including interoperability with the United States, on which cooperation in the use of force centers. Even if the SDF could not participate in joint operations or information sharing, a basis for Japan-ROK cooperation has been established. South Korea has already signed a contract to purchase four Northrop Grumman RQ-4B Global Hawk Block 30 high-altitude long-endurance (HALE) unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) at a cost of \$800 million.²² Japan's Air Self Defense Force (ASDF) similarly has decided to introduce them. This UAV system will provide real-time intelligence concerning threats posed by the DPRK. It would help all three countries to understand the DPRK's intentions if they can share intelligence gathered by the drones. Japan and the ROK could cooperate in operations because they will operate the same UAV system. Although it is unrealistic to think that Japan could fly its UAVs over the Korean Peninsula, it could gather intelligence in nearby areas. Not only Aegis ships but also P-3 reconnaissance aircraft are possessed by both Japan and South Korea. There is a lot of intelligence to share, including surface pictures and anti-submarine know-how. Such cooperation, which began between the two countries in the mid-1990s, would contribute greatly to regional security. All that remains is political determination.

CONCLUSION

It is not easy to specify how Japan is preparing to respond to provocations from North Korea for two reasons. First, the government has not yet decided on the content of its new security policy. Although the LDP has entered into discussions with Komeito, the Abe administration will not make public what Japan can do until May.²³ Some Japanese officials believe that the United States and European countries expect too much of Japan's military contributions. Second, the strained relationship between Japan and South Korea means that Japan will not be allowed to conduct any kind of military operations over Korean territory in the event of a crisis involving North Korea. Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs removed the reference to Japan and Korea being "important neighbors that share basic values such as freedom, democracy, and a market economy" on its website. It now simply notes, "South Korea is one of the most important neighbors of Japan."

When one thinks about security in the East Asian region, there is no doubting the importance of Japan-ROK-U.S. cooperation, despite the difficult relationship between Japan and South Korea. The only way for the two countries to cooperate is through their respective alliances with the United States. The U.S. rebalance to Asia will result in the allocation of 60 percent of U.S. air and naval forces to Asia by 2020, mainly to counter the "rise of China." Countries in the region have adopted security policies based on their own images of China's rise and cuts in the U.S. defense budget, potentially leading to a U.S.-China equilibrium or a power transition. But Washington's Asian policy is not simply in opposition to China, and the view that U.S. influence is in decline is too pessimistic. The United States has allies in the Asia-

Pacific region, including Japan, South Korea, and Australia, which can complement each other, forming a network of bilateral security cooperation that goes beyond the hub-and-spoke configuration of the past. Thus, the United States, together with its allies, can avoid a relative decline in the region.

There has been criticism that Japan has received a “free ride” on security, but Japan can and is ready to lessen the burden of the United States in the region. If Japan and the ROK, as U.S. allies, can cooperate in confronting the North Korean threat, this would lighten the U.S. burden and make deterrence more effective. The United States provides military support, as Japan and South Korea alone cannot maintain the security environment in the East Asian region. U.S. allies, in turn, must continue to supplement U.S. capabilities in the region. The hub-and-spoke structure is not strong enough. There are uncertainties in South Korea, as seen in the March 5 knife attack on U.S. Ambassador Mark Lippert by a South Korean nationalist demanding an end to U.S.-ROK joint military drills and in the outrage in South Korean society over U.S. Undersecretary of State Wendy Sherman’s remarks a few days earlier on historical issues. Although the South Korean government was eager to repair relations, history looms in the background with the United States as well, not only in Japan-ROK relations.

As Japan changes its security policies, concern has arisen in some neighboring states that it is turning to the far right and reverting to militarism. In striving to strengthen security cooperation with South Korea, Japan must secure Korean understanding of its intentions. To reduce lingering distrust and improve security cooperation, the United States has a central role in the discussions. It should be made clear that Japan’s shift in security policy and cooperation with South Korea is to lessen the U.S. burden. In order to achieve cooperation it is important that each country’s cooperative intentions be well understood.

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