

Commentary, March 16, 2017

## NORTH KOREAN AND JAPAN. THE MORE IT CHANGES, THE MORE IT STAYS THE SAME

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On March 6, Pyongyang fired four missiles into the Sea of Japan and three of them landed in Japan's 'exclusive economic zone' in Japanese territorial waters. The missiles travelled roughly 1.000 kilometres and landed as close as 300 kilometres from Japan's northwest coast. For now, business as usual – at least more or less – for Japan's defence planners and defence hawks. In 2016 alone North Korea conducted 20 missile and 2 nuclear tests and Tokyo has been within range of Pyongyang's short and medium-range missiles for years. Then again for the same defence planners the time could have come to move beyond the business-as-usual attitude in the months and years ahead and get (very) serious about upgrading existent and acquiring new military equipment to defend Japan against North Korean ballistic missiles. Indeed, after Pyongyang's missile launch Tokyo's defence hawks went into overdrive and put the option of pre-emptive missile strikes against North Korea (back) onto the agenda. The alleged 'necessity' to arm Japan with nuclear weapons too was voiced and while Japanese crazy talk about nuclear armament made it as abruptly off as onto Tokyo's defence policy agenda, increasingly frequent calls for acquiring U.S.-made offensive short or mid-

dle-range missiles able to hit targets in North Korea (such as missile and nuclear sites) could remain on Tokyo's 'things to do' list in a more sustainable fashion.

Indeed, the defence establishment now wants first-strike capabilities for the country's armed forces and Tokyo's current government led by Shinzo Abe is not the first one to claim that Japan – regardless of the country constitution's war-renouncing article 9– has the right to attack military bases and installations abroad in the case of an evident and/or imminent attack. Previous governments led by the Liberal-Democratic Party of Japan (LDP) have in the past several times called on Tokyo to deploy U.S.-made Tomahawk missiles able to strike Pyongyang pre-emptively. To be sure, Shinzo Abe's ears are wide open to such bellicose suggestions and his aides have already begun launching pre-emptive and preparatory messages. "It is time we acquired the capability" argues Hiroshi Imazu, chairman of the LDP's policy council on security. "I don't know whether that would be with ballistic missiles, cruise missiles or even the F-35 (fighter bomber), but without a deterrence North Korea will see us as weak." Japan's military planners it seems, however, already know what to do to enable Japan to hit North Korean missile and nuclear

sites from or around Japanese territory. A defence official cited by the news agency Reuters recently said that Tokyo's defence planners have already done the "Ground work on how Japan would acquire a strike capability." Indeed, Tokyo undoubtedly has the funds to buy state-of-the-art offensive missiles from anywhere and since the Abe-led government lifted Japan's self-imposed ban to export weapons and weapons technology a few years ago, Tokyo has significantly expanded armaments cooperation not only with Washington but also with Canberra, London and Paris.

To be sure, Japanese offensive missiles able to reach North Korea would also put parts of China's eastern coast within the range of Japanese missiles. "China has missiles that can hit Japan, so any complaints it may have are not likely to garner much sympathy in the international community," counters Japanese Defence Minister Itsunori Onodera in a recent newspaper interview, de facto dismissing Chinese concerns as irrelevant. Either way, China would certainly express its (very) strong opposition against Japanese acquisitions of offensive missiles – the same kind of strong and uncompromising opposition it is already and insistently expressing against the deployment of the advanced U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) anti-missile system deployed on South Korean soil.

For the time being Japan continues to remain vulnerable to multiple North Korean missile attacks. More than three missiles fired at the same time at Japanese territory could easily overstretch Tokyo's currently deployed ballistic missile defence installations. Equally or indeed more worrying is North Korea's apparent and improving ability to launch solid fuel missiles, which can be

launched much faster than liquid fuel missiles as they no longer need to be fuelled prior to launch. Tokyo has been reacting to the growing threat posed by advanced North Korean missiles and has improved its ballistic missile defence capabilities with longer-range, more accurate sea-based missiles on Aegis destroyers in the Sea of Japan. Furthermore, in April, Tokyo will start allocating a \$1 billion upgrade of its ground-based PAC-3 Patriot batteries and is furthermore considering to deploy a land-based version of the Aegis system or alternatively the THAAD system currently deployed in South Korea. However, such upgrades will take year to complete, the reason why Tokyo is also considering the possibility of acquiring and deploying ground-to-ground missiles on the southern Japanese Yonaguni Island to be able to hit North Korea from there. But that is not all, possibly. Tokyo's defence establishment is also reportedly flirting with the idea of buying precision air launched missiles either from Lockheed Martin in the U.S. or from Norway's Kongsberg Defence Systems.

From Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's perspective of course, ongoing North Korean missile (and nuclear) testing is evidence that he has over recent years done everything right to keep Japan safe from harm: adopting a set of new national security laws, authorizing the country's armed forces to execute the right to collective self-defence in the case of a regional contingency and military cooperation with the U.S. and finally his (obsessive) efforts – driven by his nationalist and revisionist instincts – to get rid of constitutionally-induced pacifism to make an allegedly 'normal' country out of Japan. Getting ready to fight at home and abroad it seems is the 'new normal' Japanese-style.