



## TOKYO'S NORTH KOREA HEADACHE

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In the period between 2016 and 2018 the threat North Korea posed to Japanese security increased dramatically. In that period, the regime led by Kim Jong-un carried out three nuclear tests between January 2016 and September 2017, demonstrating that it had become a de facto nuclear power. Furthermore, Pyongyang continued to increase its ballistic capabilities, both in terms of developing Inter-continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) (the Hwasong)[1], and of expanding its already significant inventory of Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBMs). Both types of missiles, coupled with nuclear weapons, generate a very serious and credible threat to Japan's national security. On the one hand the ICBMs, tested in 2016 and 2017, created the risk of de-coupling within the US-Japan (as well as the US-ROK) alliance. Those missiles, rendering the US vulnerable to North Korean missile strikes, significantly increase the risks Washington is confronted with when protecting its Northeast Asian allies. IRBMs such as the *Pukkuksong* and *Nodong* missiles directly threaten Japan. The deployment of these types of missiles has generated another strategic problem for Japan: the possibility that, during the recent rounds of negotiations with North Korea, the Trump administration could consider an agreement leading North Korea to renounce its ICBM capability, while maintaining the capacity to threaten Japan with IRBMs.

During the summer of 2017 the North Korean regime repeatedly tested both intercontinental and intermediate range missiles, with several IRBMs overflying the northern region of Hokkaido and landing in waters east of the country. Those tests significantly fed perceptions of vulnerability in Japan, resurrecting the memories of the 1998 so-called "*Taepodong* shock", when North Korea for the first time launched an intermediate range missile that flew over northern Japan. That test at the time represented a turning point for Japan, persuading

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a still largely pacifist public opinion to accept changes to Japanese security and defence policies responding to an increasingly hostile geopolitical environment. Similarly, today the North Korean threat, as well as the rapidly evolving geopolitical environment of the region, creates a number of political and military challenges for Japan.

The first regards the need to preserve the credibility of the extended deterrence guaranteed by the US-Japan alliance. Since his election in 2016, Donald Trump has injected an unprecedented degree of uncertainty into the US role in East Asia. During the presidential campaign Trump publicly questioned the strategic and political value of the US-led alliances in Asia, causing fear of abandonment in Japan, that is, Washington leaving Japan up to its own devices. During the escalation of the crisis, in 2017, his threats against Kim Jong-un, led Tokyo to fear being entrapped in an unwanted conflict against North Korea that could engulf the entire region.

The new period of détente with Pyongyang that began in early 2018 led Japanese policymakers to worry that Trump could reach an agreement that would be detrimental to Japan's interests. Tokyo therefore looked with apprehension at the possibility of an agreement that would not include so-called "CVID" (Complete, Irreversible, Verifiable, De-nuclearization) and the dismantlement of both North Korean ICBM and IRBM missiles. These concerns were particularly acute after the first US-DPRK summit held in Singapore in June 2018. The fact that the so-called Singapore Declaration signed on that occasion simply alluded to the two sides' commitment to "work towards the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula", and Trump's pledge to suspend any military exercises with South Korea heightened Japanese anxieties about a possible US retrenchment from its security commitments in East Asia.

The failure of the second US-North Korean summit recently held in Hanoi had a mixed reception in Japan. On the one hand, the lack of progress means that North Korea continues to pose a severe threat with its nuclear weapons and its ballistic missile arsenal. On the other, from Tokyo's perspective, the fact that Trump did not accept an unfavourable agreement – leading to recognizing the development of either significant parts of its nuclear programme or of its ballistic capabilities – was welcomed with relief in Tokyo. In this context, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has sought to preserve the alliance from Trump's unilateral tendencies and his frequent, and often dramatic, policy changes. So far, he has avoided the worst-case scenario defined by de-coupling, a reduced ability to provide deterrence or a meaningless agreement between the US and North Korea. The second challenge concerns the diplomatic realm. Tokyo has been largely excluded from the negotiations with Pyongyang, led mostly by the Trump administration and the South Korean government. Bilateral relations with Seoul significantly deteriorated after the election of Moon Jae-in, due to new tensions over the disputes concerning the Dokdo/Takeshima Islands and over memories of the Japanese occupation of the Korean Peninsula from 1910-1945. As a consequence, the Abe-led government has struggled to make sure that the negotiations consider Japan's interests, particularly regarding the issue of the abductees[2] and the threat posed by IRBM missiles.

The third challenge regards the military realm. The Abe-led government, after introducing very significant reforms such as new guidelines for US-Japan defence cooperation. And the re-interpretation of article Nine of the Constitution in 2015, has promoted another important step: the approval of the new National Defence Program Guidelines (NDPG), the document that defines the country's strategic priorities for the next decade.



The 2019 NDPG introduces a number of measures aimed at dealing with the North Korean threat, such as new investments in ballistic missile defence, new ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) capabilities, and additional resources in the field of cyber and space security. Moreover, the document foresees modernization of the Air Self-Defence Forces with the acquisition of 150 F-35 jet fighters.

Finally, while negotiations with North Korea, promoted by South Korea and the United States, have momentarily reduced

the risk of conflict in the region, the threat posed by the North Korean regime is still present. In this situation, Japan has found itself in a very difficult situation due to the unpredictability of the Trump administration and the deterioration of bilateral relations with South Korea. Overall, in the foreseeable future, Prime Minister Abe does not have many alternatives other than continuing his strategy aimed at preserving the effectiveness of the alliance and boosting Japan's own military capabilities, while trying to overcome the current isolation from the negotiating process with North Korea.

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1. During this period North Korea tested three types of Hwasong ICBMs, 12, 14 and 15.
  2. The North Korean regime abducted 17 Japanese citizens between 1977 and 1982. North Korea recognized the abductions in 2002, allowing five victims to return to Japan in 2002. The Japanese government considers the resolution of this issue a necessary precondition to improve relations with North Korea.