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# Japan and the North Korean Dilemma: Thinking the Unthinkable

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*What are the likely scenarios for resolution of the North Korean problem, and how can Japan help bring about such a resolution? In a recent interview, Tokyo Foundation research fellow and security expert Bonji Ohara spoke candidly about the prospects for war and peace on the Korean Peninsula.*

*North Korea has carried out quite a few nuclear tests and missile launches over the years. Why has that activity suddenly created such a high level of international tension?*

**BONJI OHARA:** I think the basic reason is a sudden surge in American awareness of the North Korean threat. For the past two decades, Washington has followed a policy of “strategic patience” with regard to Pyongyang and its nuclear weapons program. But recently the administration of President Donald Trump declared this policy a failure and said that all options were on the table. These remarks provoked a furious reaction from North Korea, resulting in the situation we’re looking at today.

What’s driving Washington’s response is alarm over the speed at which North Korea’s nuclear technology is progressing. Pyongyang began making reference to possession of ballistic missiles early last year, and the range of its missiles is definitely expanding. Such factors have convinced many observers that a fully functional intercontinental ballistic missile can’t be far off. The idea that Pyongyang might soon have the capability to target the United States directly—not just with words but with actual nuclear weapons—has fueled Washington’s sense of crisis.

### **Two Wildcards**

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*A North Korean missile is paraded during an April 15, 2017, military parade to celebrate the 105th birth anniversary of Kim Il Sung. © GettyImages*

I think many people in the region are full of trepidation right now concerning the possibility of a military clash. Of course, the media coverage contributes to this, but there’s also anxiety stemming from these two wildcards, Kim Jong-un and President Trump. It’s unclear whether their actions can be expected to fall into line with established strategic behavior on either side.

Much like China in the 1960s, North Korea has for some time pursued a strategy of “rational irrationality.” Pyongyang has gotten other governments to proceed cautiously by projecting the image of an irrational regime that might do anything, regardless of consequences.

The Trump administration, similarly, is said to be making use of the “uncertainty principle.” Like the North Koreans, they’re hoping to get their adversary to proceed more cautiously by leaving it unclear as to just how much the US will tolerate. When one draws a red line, it’s tantamount to saying that any action short of that will *not* provoke a military response, and it can also be interpreted as unwillingness to use force. During the Obama administration, both North Korea and China employed the strategy of challenging the administration’s red lines, putting one toe over, then another, until they had ascertained that the United States wasn’t going to do anything, at which point they would step boldly across. What President Trump is doing, by contrast, is conveying the message that the United States might really resort to force.

In any case, it’s impossible to predict with confidence what’s actually going to happen henceforth, but one thing we can gather is that the United States is working hard to smooth the way for military action, and this suggests that, depending on North Korea’s response, such action is a real possibility.

Vice-President Mike Pence recently visited South Korea, Japan, and Australia, and we can surmise that part of his mission was to secure advance approval and support for military action against North Korea should that prove necessary. As we speak, the aircraft carrier *USS Carl Vinson* is conducting joint exercises with Japan’s Maritime Self-Defense Force on its way toward the Korean Peninsula, and prior to that it conducted exercises with the Australian navy. So, we see the United States going around reconfirming its alliances in the region, which suggests that military action isn’t entirely out of the question.

### **Japan’s Worst Nightmare**

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*The USS Carl Vinson conducts joint exercises with MSDF vessels in the western Pacific. © KyodoNews*

*What are the biggest dangers from Japan’s viewpoint?*

**OHARA:** Well, there are a number of concerns. If the United States fails to make good on its threats, then North Korea’s nuclear development program will doubtless accelerate. Japan’s worst nightmare, in my opinion is that the global community will sit back and permit the emergence of a new order in which a rogue state can use the threat of violence to get what it wants.

On the other hand, if America does use military force, there’s a possibility that North Korea will retaliate against Japan or South Korea. Even if the United States laid very careful plans to take out all the North’s missile silos and nuclear facilities, as well as its conventional offensive capability vis-à-vis Japan and South Korea, it would be very hard to ensure 100 percent success. If any capability remains, North Korea could certainly use it against Japan or South Korea. So, the decision regarding the use of force to stop North Korea needs to zero in on that risk and consider how it can best be minimized.

Another concern is the possibility of a refugee crisis in event that the North is destabilized. China has repeatedly deployed troops to the border with North Korea and has strong border measures in place to keep out refugees. If refugees are stopped from leaving via a land route, some will take to the sea, and that could put pressure on Japan as well as South Korea. If refugees flee by water, boats are bound to sink, and Japan has to decide how to respond in such a situation. No doubt the government has already considered this, but I think the people also have to be prepared for such an eventuality.

*If the United States were to take military action against North Korea, what sort of role might the Self-Defense Forces play?*

**OHARA:** The SDF can provide support for US military action through refueling operations and the like. Since this will give Pyongyang reason to attack Japan, the SDF would doubtless coordinate closely with US naval vessels in implementing missile defense and other defensive operations. The United States and its allies, including Japan and South Korea, are linked via a network of naval vessels equipped with the Aegis missile defense system. In this context, the GSOMIA [General Security of Military Information Agreement] intelligence-sharing pact that Tokyo and Seoul inked last year would certainly come into play.

Now that Japan is legally able to participate in limited forms of collective self-defense, anytime Japanese vessels are in formation with US naval forces, our own forces could become involved in military action to defend the fleet, including US warships. Once you’re in formation, everyone has a designated role to play, and you perform your duty according that role. We have a framework for bilateral defense cooperation, and in the event of US military action against North Korea, participation in operations becomes a real possibility.

### **China’s Role**

*What sort of role do we expect China to play going forward?*

**OHARA:** Well, of course, all the parties will continue to urge Pyongyang to exercise restraint. But the world is looking to China in particular to exert its influence over Pyongyang. On the one hand, Beijing keeps insisting that dialogue and negotiation are the way. On the other hand, you hear Foreign Minister Wang Yi and others warning that tensions [between North Korea and the United States] are at a boiling point, which I would view as a way of threatening Pyongyang.

The unprecedented criticism that Pyongyang has directed against Beijing this time around is evidence that China has in fact been applying pressure, and this is probably why Trump says said he believes China is working hard to rein in North Korea. I think that China may be making a show of condemning the use of force against North Korea even while privately acknowledging that such action by the United States may be unavoidable.

In terms of applying pressure on North Korea, China has prohibited all imports of North Korean coal, and travel in North Korea is currently barred both for Chinese tourists and to non-Chinese seeking to travel there via China. The economic impact of these sanctions is evident from the fact that North Korea is increasingly turning to Russia. This April, there was an announcement that a new ferry service was soon to start up between North Korea and Vladivostok. They’re using the *Man Gyong Bong*, the same ship that was previously used to transport passengers and cargo between Japan and North Korea.

If Russia is prepared to step in and ease the pressure whenever China applies the screws, that could be a big problem. But it’s China that has cultivated direct economic ties with North Korea, and the prospect of losing China’s support is terrifying to Pyongyang. In time, Russia might step up its cooperation with North Korea, in which case Chinese sanctions would lose some of their effect, so I think it’s important to apply as much pressure as possible on North Korea over the short term.

### **What Can Japan Do?**

*How should Japan deal with the situation?*

**OHARA:** To begin with, we need to have a clear sense of purpose. The Japanese government has worked closely with Washington to convey the message that we can’t allow anyone to use nuclear or other weapons to threaten the international order. But the Japanese people also need to understand the purpose of the pressure we’re applying to the North in cooperation with Washington, and to realize that one of the options for achieving that purpose is the use of US military force. We have to accept that there are risks involved and be willing to take them rather than allow such a challenge from North Korea to stand.

All of that said, it’s doubtful that the United States will take military action in the immediate future, since the current strategy is to see if China can rein in Pyongyang. No one wants to destroy North Korea as a country; we just want to prevent it from threatening the world with violence. Japan needs to contribute to that goal at the same time that China is applying pressure.

What, then, can Japan do? Japan can’t apply any more clout than the United States can when it comes to eliciting action from Beijing. But I think Japan could have a diplomatic role to play vis-à-vis Russia, as well as the Southeast Asian and the Middle Eastern countries that are enabling North Korea to evade sanctions. Prime Minister [Shinzo] Abe will be visiting Moscow very soon now. He should be able to raise the topic of how to deal with the North Korean problem in the context of strengthening cooperation between Russia and Japan.

Some countries in Southeast Asia have been relatively lenient toward Pyongyang. Indonesia and Malaysia have both been slow to submit reports verifying their compliance with UN economic sanctions against North Korea, and we know that the flow of money and goods persists. They still have embassies in Pyongyang, so it’s obvious they’re continuing with people-to-people exchange. These Southeast Asian nations also have close ties with Japan and China, for the most part. They may not be particularly well disposed toward the United States, but they’re not anti-Japanese. Japan should approach them with its own arguments, independent from Washington’s line, and persuade them that economic sanctions and other pressure on North Korea are of critical importance to the region.

*(Interview conducted by the Tokyo Foundation public communications department on April 24, 2017.)*

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**Bio** Graduated from the National Defense Academy of Japan in 1985 and completed a master's program at the University of Tsukuba in 1998. Became the leading pilot of the 101st flight division, Maritime Self-Defense Force, in 1998. Enrolled in the General Course of the National Institute for Defense Studies in 2001. Stationed in China between 2003 and 2006 as a naval attaché. Became chief of the intelligence section, MSDF Maritime Staff Office, Ministry of Defense, in 2006; executive officer of the 21st Flight Squadron, MSDF, in 2008; and commanding officer of the squadron the following year. Joined NIDS as a research fellow in 2010. Worked at IHS Jane's from 2011 as an analyst and business development manager before assuming his present position in January 2013.

**Research Results**

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