

# Dealing with North Korea through Trilateral Cooperation: The View from Japan

Ryo Hinata-Yamaguchi

Project Assistant Professor at the Research Center for Advanced Science and Technology, the University of Tokyo

[기획자 註] 윤석열 정부 출범 이후 공고한 한미동맹을 기반으로 한미일 협력을 강화함으로써 북한과 중국으로부터의 위협에 대응해야 한다는 주장이 다시 주목을 받고 있다. 이에, 제주평화연구원은 일본의 위협 인식에 대해 분석함으로써, 한일 양국이 정치, 군사, 외교적으로 협력할 수 있는 분야를 살펴보고 이를 통해 한일관계를 더욱 발전시킬 수 있는 방향을 모색하고자 한다.  
[기획: 박동준 연구실장([djpark@jpi.or.kr](mailto:djpark@jpi.or.kr))]

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## Abstract

In recent years, North Korea has achieved robust developments in its nuclear strike capabilities. Today, the threats posed by the Korean People's Army (KPA) are far greater than those of the past, warranting improvements in the defense readiness of the United States (US), Japan, and the Republic of Korea (ROK). This paper discusses the key threats North Korea poses to Japan's security, the measures Japan is taking to better prepare the Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF), and the need for better coordination and cooperation between the US, Japan, and the ROK.

## Developments in North Korea's Capabilities

Since the 1960s, North Korea has worked to strengthen the KPA under the military planning doctrine "line of self-reliant defense" which consists of four principles: building a cadre-based military; modernizing the entire forces; arming all citizens; and nationwide fortification. The "line of self-reliant defense" aims to strengthen the KPA's readiness while also ensuring the loyalty of the military to the regime, remaining to serve as the fundamental doctrine that has shaped the KPA's structure, readiness, and management.<sup>1)</sup>

1) Ryo Hinata-Yamaguchi, *Defense Planning and Readiness of North Korea: Armed to Rule* (Oxfordshire, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2021).

Under the “line of self-reliant defense,” North Korea’s military “modernization” was much about quantitatively boosting the KPA despite being behind the technological curve. But since the late 2010s, North Korea’s efforts began to bear fruit, and some significant developments have come under the “five-year plan for the development of the defense science and the weapon system” issued in January 2021. Recent weapons tests and drills, as well as military parades, have demonstrated the capabilities of North Korea’s new arsenals, including ballistic and cruise missiles; missile launch vehicles; unmanned systems; ground combat vehicles; cyber warfare systems; surface vessels and submarines; and reconnaissance satellite systems. Moreover, North Korea is also working to upgrade their command and control systems to carry out strategic and tactical strikes.<sup>2)</sup>

Indeed, the developments and range of weapons unveiled do not reflect the KPA’s actual state of readiness. Despite heavy devotion of resources to the military sector, there are severe shortages in logistics and supplies, education and training, as well as personnel. Taken together, North Korea is still disadvantaged compared to the US, the ROK, and Japan in military readiness, and can only be effective under specific conditions. Yet while the KPA’s readiness may be far from perfect, the reality is that the North Korean military threat is far greater than those of the past and should not be treated as “business as usual.”

## Threats to Japan

North Korea poses several growing threats to Japan’s security. From the North Korean viewpoint, Japan is a target not simply out of historical animosity, but because of Japan’s defense readiness and the US Forces Japan (USFJ) that could be employed against North Korea.

For Japan, other than the concerns that come from the possession of lethal assets by an adversarial state, the actual threats posed by North Korea are two-fold. Direct attacks by North Korea against Japan are not limited to a direct war between the two, but also as measures by the former to neutralize the Japanese and USFJ capabilities that would act in case of a war on the Korean Peninsula. Second and relatedly, North Korea seeks to use its assets to achieve escalation dominance through its nuclear missiles and other assets in order to deter intervention by Japan in any potential conflict with the ROK, thereby restricting Japan’s ability to cooperate with the ROK militarily.

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2) Ryo Hinata-Yamaguchi, “North Korean Missile Volley Shows a New Level of Command and Control Complexity,” *NKPro*, November 3, 2023, <https://www.nknews.org/pro/north-korean-missile-volley-shows-a-new-level-of-command-and-control-complexity/>.

Taken together, the implications for Japan and the ROK of the threats posed by North Korea are intertwined. At the same time, the nature of the threats need to be contextualized. The ROK faces threats from a greater variety of conventional weapons and weapons of mass destruction via all domains, while the threats faced by Japan are more focused on missiles, cyber-attacks, and disruptive operations in the air and maritime domains.

Still, even if the ROK faces a more complex and larger threat, the risks for Japan are nonetheless acute. The North Korean nuclear missile threat is greater than ever before given the regime's broader range of ballistic and cruise missiles. Furthermore, a significant portion of North Korea's arsenal of missiles are capable of flying in a maneuverable trajectory that can penetrate existing missile defense systems. The risks are not simply the destruction of cities, critical infrastructures, and defense assets, but also major disruptions caused by electronic magnetic pulses (EMP).

It is also important to note that the threats posed by North Korea to Japan's security are not limited to those directed at the Japanese archipelago. For instance, while it is the intermediate and medium-range ballistic missiles that are designed to strike Japan and the US forces based in Japan, the short-range ballistic missiles and other weapons targeting the ROK and the USFK, and the intercontinental ballistic missiles that target the US have severe indirect implications as they degrade the collective capabilities of the US, Japan, and the ROK to deal with North Korea.

North Korea's cyber warfare capabilities also pose significant threats to Japan, not only by potentially inflicting damage and disruption to critical infrastructures and forces but also through espionage and illicit financial activities. North Korea's cyber capabilities are also closely linked to its nuclear missile capabilities; Pyongyang could execute cyber and electronic attacks to disrupt the opponent's C4ISR systems to undermine their missile defense and response capabilities.

The major problem for Japan is that it simultaneously faces neighboring threats from three nuclear actors – China, North Korea, and Russia – consequently creating defense planning and readiness problems in defending against them effectively and efficiently. In particular, Japan, together with the US has to be conscious about the risks of simultaneous conflicts in the Taiwan Strait, Korean Peninsula, East China Sea, as well as the South China Sea. Hence, although one could posit that North Korea is merely one of the threats, the growing nature of the threat creates greater dilemmas for Tokyo to ensure the nation's security.

## Japan' s Measures

The growing nature of the North Korean military threat since the 1990s has catalyzed developments in Japan' s defense readiness over the years. Still, the enhancements in the JSDF' s readiness were incremental, seldom keeping pace with the developments in the capabilities and threats posed by the KPA. The most significant development came in December 2022 when the Japanese government issued the new National Security Strategy (NSS), the National Defense Strategy (NDS), and the Defense Buildup Program (DBP) that made robust changes to Japan' s defense plans and posture while sticking to the pacifist constitution.

The 2022 NDS outlined seven key areas to strengthen the JSDF' s readiness, including: “stand-off defense capabilities;” “integrated air and missile defense capabilities;” “unmanned defense capabilities;” “cross-domain operation capabilities;” “command and control and intelligence-related functions;” “mobile deployment capabilities and civil protection;” and “sustainability and resiliency.”<sup>3)</sup> All seven areas are vital to better responding to threats and operating under war conditions, particularly as Japan faces multifaceted threats from China, North Korea, and Russia.

With regards to defending against the North Korean nuclear threat, Japan has worked on enhancing its air and missile defense capabilities since the 1980s, but it was North Korea' s missile tests in the 1990s that led to significant developments. Today, Japan' s missile defense system consists of the Aegis-guided SM-3 and the Patriot PAC-3 systems with the former to be soon replaced by the SM-6. Given the significant developments in North Korea' s missile capabilities, Japan is also working on more advanced early warning and interception systems to better detect and track launches. Still, issues remain on how Japan can better defend against swarm attacks and maneuverable missiles – an aspect North Korea has been making some progress in recent years.

Japan is also building counterstrike capabilities as a means of degrading the opponent' s ability to execute subsequent strikes. At this stage, Japan' s counterstrike capabilities will include the extended range Type 12 surface-to-ship missiles and Tomahawk cruise missiles. Japan is also working to develop two types of hypersonic weapons — hypersonic cruise missiles (HCM) and hypersonic glide vehicles (HVGPs). Additionally, there are even debates in Japan over the plausibility of fielding medium-range ballistic missiles.

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3) Japan Ministry of Defense, *National Defense Strategy* (December 16, 2022).

But while Japan is making progress in acquiring counterstrike capabilities, there is still much that needs to be done in completing the counterstrike effect chain. In particular, Japan will need to develop and establish the right C4ISR systems to acquire the targets. The problem, however, is that even if such systems are established, North Korea's strike assets are mobile and well concealed, creating challenges in detecting and acquiring them.

Japan is also working to further enhance other capabilities such as anti-submarine warfare and cyber defense that are vital in defending against North Korea. Together with enhanced missile defense, counterstrike, C4ISR, hardened facilities, and joint operations readiness, Japan will be better positioned to defend against the North Korean nuclear threat. The question is, however, whether Japan can implement the contents of the NSS, NDS, and DBP as planned.

## Importance of US-Japan-ROK Trilateral Cooperation

To deal with the threats posed by North Korea, US-Japan-ROK trilateral efforts are critical. While trilateral coordination and cooperation have been disrupted on various occasions over the years, there have been positive developments over the past couple of years with proactive efforts by the Kishida and Yoon administrations.

The Camp David trilateral summit in August 2023 was a step forward, particularly in aligning and institutionalizing the security visions of the US, Japan, and the ROK. The US, Japan, and the ROK have institutionalized trilateral cooperation in the past, with initiatives such as the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (1999-2003), the Defense Trilateral Talks (2008-), and many others. The problem, however, has been that despite success in converging interests and procedures at the operational level, these efforts have often been disrupted and undermined by political agendas and issues – particularly between Seoul and Tokyo. Thus, even with the various defense exchanges and dialogues, exercises, and General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), the fact of the matter is that Japan-ROK defense relations have not lived up to their potential.

The crux of the problem, therefore, is about the sustainability of US-Japan-ROK trilateral coordination and cooperation, particularly with the delicate nature of Japan-ROK relations. While the three countries are working to institutionalize the framework and produce outcomes to prove the benefits of trilateral coordination and cooperation, there are still concerns about reversals by revisionist administrations in the future.

Broader challenges beyond periodic political frictions between Japan and the ROK also remain. The foremost questions lie in defining what the trilateral framework is for, and how to shape the sustainable framework to execute the strategies. In recent years, a consensus has emerged that the US-Japan-ROK cooperation is vital to dealing with not only North Korea but also China, particularly considering the risks of simultaneous contingencies in the region.<sup>4)</sup> For example, at the Camp David summit, the three countries agreed to work together on various traditional and non-traditional security issues beyond the Korean peninsula, expressing common interests concerning the Taiwan Strait, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands. However, although US-Japan-ROK cooperation to deal with the myriad issues in the Indo-Pacific is certainly encouraging, the risk that this may potentially dilute much needed attention on the threats posed by North Korea needs to be addressed.

In this context, the US, Japan, and the ROK should consider further institutionalizing trilateral cooperation. While there is no need to establish a trilateral combined command, the three countries should establish platforms to discuss and connect their defense strategies, operations, and readiness. Last April, the US and the ROK established the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) to coordinate their deterrence against North Korean nuclear attacks. While the NCG is exclusively bilateral at this point, the three countries could establish a separate trilateral group to discuss matters relating to nuclear strategies and extended deterrence.

The US, Japan, and the ROK will also need to take a more holistic approach to dealing with North Korea by expanding their operations. On top of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, missile defense, search and rescue, and anti-submarine warfare, the three countries should also enhance their partnership in areas such as naval mine warfare, cyber and electronic warfare, outer space, evacuation of citizens, illegal trafficking, and logistics. Enhancing capabilities in these areas would require coordination of defense, but also law enforcement, and other security and economic institutions.

The practical aspects of US-Japan-ROK trilateral efforts also need further work, particularly in terms of interoperability.<sup>5)</sup> Despite improving levels of bilateral interoperability in the US-Japan and US-ROK partnerships, there are still gaps between the Japanese and ROK forces. Improvements are underway through greater communication, exercises, and real-time sharing of information. Still, much more needs to be done, particularly in bridging the procedural and structural differences,

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4) Markus Garlauskas, "The United States and its Allies Must Be Ready to Deter a Two-front War and Nuclear Attacks in East Asia." Atlantic Council Report, August 16, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-united-states-and-its-allies-must-be-ready-to-deter-a-two-front-war-and-nuclear-attacks-in-east-asia/>.

5) Ryo Hinata-Yamaguchi, "Why Interoperability Remains a Hurdle for Trilateral Cooperation on North Korea." *NKPro*, September 20, 2023, <https://www.nknews.org/pro/why-interoperability-remains-a-hurdle-for-trilateral-cooperation-on-north-korea/>.

especially between Japan and the ROK. Exchanges and exercises, as well as the dispatchment of liaison officers are just a couple of measures that may lead to tangible short-term enhancements in this domain.

While achieving the above are far from easy, there are strong demands for Japan, the US, and the ROK to pursue those improvements to better defend against the threats and risks that undermine security in the Indo-Pacific region.

#### 저자소개

現 도쿄대학교 첨단과학기술연구센터(RCAST) 특임조교이며, 현재 미국 Atlantic Council의 Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security 및 Indo-Pacific Security Initiative, 그리고 Pacific Forum의 선임연구원으로 활동하고 있음. University of New South Wales, Canberra에서 정치학 박사학위 취득하였으며, 관심 연구분야는 국방계획, 군사전략, 교통부문정책, 인도태평양 안보 등임. 최근 주요 논문 및 저서로는 *Defense Planning and Readiness of North Korea: Armed to Rule* (Routledge, 2021), “Optimizing Joint Operational Readiness: Lessons for Japan (Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force Command and Staff College Review), 등이 있음. 과거 부산대학교 객원교수(2014-2021), Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang 객원강사(2013), Pacific Forum의 Lloyd and Lilian Vasey 방문 펠로우(2012-2013) 등으로 재직한 바 있음.

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