

Chapter Five

North Korea: A Catalyst for Policy Coordination between the United States and Japan

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Introduction

North Korea has been exceptionally skilled at exploiting wedge issues between alliance partners. This strategy characterized North Korea's decades-long maneuvering between its primary Cold War patrons, China and the Soviet Union. North Korea has also used this tactic to separate the United States from South Korea, as well as to evade international pressure from the nations in the Six-Party Talks. However, while North Korea has exploited differences among partners in opposing coalitions, its provocations have also strengthened international coordination in the face of heightened perceptions of tension on the Korean Peninsula. As a result, North Korea's provocative acts have been an inadvertent catalyst for Northeast Asian regionalism for over two decades,¹ and have served as a basis for strengthening alliance coordination between the United States and Japan.

North Korean aggression spurred the development of the US alliance system in Northeast Asia following the Korean War and provided an immediate rationale for a strong US–Japan alliance. This partnership began during the war when Japan served as a base for logistical support for operations in Korea and allowed the construction of UN-flagged bases for the war effort. These developments, as well as the establishment of a US–Japan partnership dedicated to preserving security in East Asia, all represent contributions by North Korea to the development of the US–Japan alliance. This alliance has served as the cornerstone of US strategy in the Asia–Pacific region, with North Korea serving as a primary preoccupation, justification, and challenge that has influenced its development.

Since the end of the Cold War, North Korea and its actions have garnered even more attention as an emerging challenge that could have direct implications for Japan's security. Unlike the abstract challenge of strategic confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, North Korea emerged from the Cold War as a tangible regional security issue which was decoupled from global strategic stability. It carried with it a possibly growing and potentially direct impact on the security of Japan. Both the prospect of North Korean instability and North Korea's expanding threat capacity brought Japan within its direct striking range for the first time, while the US commitment to defend Japan seemed less certain than during the Cold War in the eyes of Japanese. This new challenge galvanized deeper political and military coordination between the United States and Japan, but also raised doubts in some quarters about the credibility of the US commitment to defend Japan

¹ Scott Snyder, "The Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asian Stability," in David Shambaugh and Michael Yahuda, eds., *International Relations of Asia* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), pp. 270–271.

against North Korean aggression. Although the “relevance” of the alliance has increased, failure to resolve this new challenge may constrain the future of the relationship.² As a result, North Korea has emerged as a potential wedge issue in the US–Japan alliance, and its security threat provides a very practical litmus test through which to judge the fundamental US commitment to the defense of Japan.

The emergence of North Korea’s nuclear development efforts as a focus of international concern in the early 1990s sensitized the Japanese public to the dangers posed by the North. The first North Korean nuclear crisis also prompted a reevaluation of US and Japanese military readiness. Renewed tensions catalyzed a review of Japan’s ability to provide logistical support for US military units, and made clear the necessity of unprecedented trilateral meetings on defense and security issues among American, Japanese, and South Korean military officials. These meetings were arguably the first step toward more intensive security exchanges and cooperation between the Japanese and South Korean defense establishments, a remarkable development given the history of conflict between Japan and South Korea.

This chapter will analyze the past fifteen years of North Korea’s provocations, and introduce five turning points that have significantly influenced US–Japan alliance coordination. It will also examine North Korea’s pursuit of asymmetric military capabilities to further its diplomatic and political aims, and increased US–Japan alliance coordination as a response to these threats. This enhanced coordination has five main components:

- 1 Coordination on North Korean missiles, including development of ballistic missile defense (BMD);
- 2 Strengthened US–Japan bilateral strategic coordination;
- 3 Establishment of the US–Japan–ROK Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG);
- 4 Increased US–Japan consultations regarding the Six-Party Talks; and
- 5 Development of US–Japan coordinated response plans for potential North Korean instability.

The chapter will conclude with some modest recommendations for the US–Japan alliance to deal with the next phase of the North Korean challenge.

North Korean Provocations: Impact on the US–Japan Alliance

In a little over a decade, the challenge of coordinating policy toward North Korea has been complicated by a series of North Korean provocations and rising US–DPRK tensions. This chapter assesses the state and evolution of US–Japan alliance coordination by analyzing the response of the alliance to each of these provocations. By doing so, the chapter intends to assess the extent to which North Korea has pushed the allies together or exploited wedge issues to foment discord within the US–Japan alliance.

² Yasuyo Sakata, “Korea and the Japan-United States Alliance: A Japanese Perspective,” unpublished paper for Alliance Constrained project, John G. Ikenberry and Takashi Inoguchi, eds.

The Emerging DPRK Threat as a Major Driver for Improved Policy Coordination: The 1998 Taepodong Test

The August 1998 launch of North Korea's Taepodong missile, a multi-stage rocket topped with an artificial satellite that flew over Japanese territory, came as a major shock to the Japanese public. The idea that a regime as secretive and seemingly irrational as North Korea's could reach out and "touch" Japan was especially unsettling because Japan had been largely insulated from direct threats during the Cold War. Suddenly, North Korean missiles made an attack on the Japanese mainland a realistic possibility.

The Taepodong launch revealed major rifts in US–Japan alliance coordination. The launch came at a sensitive moment in US–DPRK negotiations over inspections of a suspected nuclear site that might have revealed North Korea to be flouting the Agreed Framework negotiated only four years earlier. After numerous delays, financing for the project to build proliferation-resistant light-water reactors under the auspices of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) was finally settled in October 1998. However, the United States needed Japanese Diet support for up to one billion dollars in appropriations based on Japan's pledge to play a "significant" role in KEDO. During his visit to Seoul in December 1998, Japanese State Secretary for Foreign Affairs Keizo Takemi stressed that it would be "very difficult" for the Japanese government to move ahead with the KEDO process given the challenge of securing Diet support following North Korea's missile test.³ After a delay of several weeks, the Japanese Diet finally yielded to pressure from the United States and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA) to fund KEDO, despite public concerns about providing support for North Korea.⁴ In the aftermath of the Taepodong test, the United States negotiated a bilateral missile moratorium with North Korea in which Pyongyang pledged not to launch more missiles as long as negotiations continued.

An October 1998 Pentagon assessment of the North Korean launch determined that North Korea had tried to launch an artificial satellite based on the track of the Taepodong rocket. While the launch failed, the report found that North Korea had used the opportunity to test its long-range missile capability. The Japanese Defense Agency (JDA), using the same data, came to the conclusion that North Korea had conducted a missile launch.

The Taepodong test also spurred controversy among Japanese lawmakers, who were incensed by the perception that the United States had not notified Japan of an impending missile launch. In reality, a small number of senior Japanese defense officials had known about the Taepodong launch in advance but chose not to share the information with lawmakers, fearing that leaks might jeopardize their access to valuable intelligence. The Diet uproar fed doubts in Japan about the US alliance commitment to defend Japan. In addition, Japanese attention turned to the performance of Japanese Aegis destroyers tasked with monitoring North Korea's missile launch. The failure of Japanese Aegis's command and control system to efficiently inform Japanese political leaders about the launch and prepare effective counter-measures became the main subject of criticism.

³ Jun Kwan Woo, "N. Korean missile would jeopardize KEDO project, says Japanese official," *The Korea Herald*, December 23, 1998.

⁴ "Discord Noted Between MOFA, MOF over KEDO Funding," *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, October 26, 1998, p. 2 (FTS19981029000906), and "Tokyo Searching Timing to Lift Freeze on KEDO Cooperation," *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, September 11, 1998, p. 2 (FTS19980914000044).

The Taepodong test also catalyzed Japanese domestic efforts to build and launch intelligence satellites and pressured Japan to commit to joint efforts with the United States to develop what was then known as theater missile defense (TMD). After debating for a long time over the question of whether to join the United States in researching missile defense capabilities, Japan committed to a multi-billion dollar research program on missile defense four months after the Taepodong launch.

By revealing the inadequacies of Japan’s intelligence collection, communications, and analysis capabilities, the Taepodong launch catalyzed efforts to reform the structure of communications within the JDA and Prime Minister’s office, with Japan announcing plans to develop an indigenous surveillance satellite system in November 1998. The reforms that flowed from this shock, including the establishment of imagery intelligence analytical units within the Cabinet Information Office and Defense Intelligence Headquarters, enhanced Japan’s readiness to face similar threats in the future.⁵ The 1998 missile launch also increased Japan’s willingness to confront North Korea when its vessels entered Japanese territorial waters. This was seen most clearly in March 1999 when the Japanese coast guard fired on an intruding vessel and eventually sank a North Korean ship in Japanese territorial waters for the first time.⁶

The Taepodong test caused the first real post-Cold War crack in Japanese confidence regarding the US commitment to defend Japan in the event of conflict with North Korea. The gap between American and Japanese assessments of the Taepodong launch revealed a potential discord between the allies in interpreting North Korean actions given the US failure to notify Japan on the launch. It also signaled the possibility of differences over how to respond to future North Korean missile launches, especially if they were to land on Japanese soil. If this disagreement were left unaddressed, many worried that it could fester and damage Japan’s confidence in the alliance. However, the Clinton administration did little to alleviate concerns about a rift between the two countries. The United States pursued a missile deal focused solely on long-range missiles, which left Japan potentially vulnerable to the intermediate-range Rodong/Nodong missiles already deployed in North Korea. The gap between the Japanese public perception of vulnerability and US efforts to keep negotiations with North Korea going marked the first evidence of a “North Korea perception gap” in the US–Japan alliance.

Revelations of North Korea’s Covert Uranium Enrichment: A Test for Koizumi and Bush

The discovery that North Korea had begun developing a uranium-based nuclear weapons program presented a challenge for the George W. Bush administration, as well as another test for the US–Japan alliance. Unfortunately, this revelation came at an awkward time in the US–Japan relationship. Despite the establishment of a warm personal rapport between President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, the heads of state were going in opposite directions on policy toward North Korea by 2002. While the Bush administration resisted direct engagement with North Korea (despite pressure from South

⁵ Sung Jae Choi, “The North Korean Factor in the Improvement of Japanese Intelligence Capability,” *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2005, pp. 369–397.

⁶ David Fouse, “Japan’s Post-Cold War North Korea Policy: Hedging toward Autonomy?” Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies Occasional Paper Series, February 2004.

Korea under Kim Dae Jung), the Koizumi administration held a series of secret talks with the North Korean leadership. These negotiations culminated in a one-day visit by Koizumi to Pyongyang for a face-to-face meeting with Kim Jong Il on September 17, 2002. With the US intelligence community reaching a clear consensus that the North Koreans were pursuing a covert uranium enrichment program in order to develop nuclear weapons, the timing of Koizumi's trip would have become even more awkward for the two allies had the US already confronted North Korea about these activities at the time of the Koizumi visit. Instead, the United States planned to raise the issue in the first high-level US direct contact with North Korea during the Bush administration, a visit to Pyongyang by Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific James A. Kelly in early October 2002.

Advance consultations with the US government regarding Koizumi's plan to visit Pyongyang had not been well executed. During a visit to Japan in the summer of 2002, Japanese government officials briefed Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage in elliptical terms on Japan's contacts with North Korea, but the announcement of Koizumi's visit for the most part caught American officials off-guard. This made the inclusion of US concerns in the agenda for the Koizumi visit even more sensitive. While the visit to Pyongyang was managed in a sober, low-key fashion, it yielded a number of surprises; the most dramatic of which was Kim Jong Il's admission of North Korea's abduction of Japanese citizens in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the subsequent return of five abductees to Japan. The issue captured Japanese media attention and became a public obsession in the weeks following the visit, especially because the original understanding on the part of the North Korean side was that the release of these five abductees was temporary. However, it quickly became clear that the abductees wanted to remain in Japan. Ultimately, the Japanese government allowed the abductees to remain in Japan, thereby breaching the understanding with North Korea.

The primary diplomatic result of Koizumi's visit, the Pyongyang Declaration, was carefully written to ensure that Japan remained flexible on the nuclear issue, possibly in anticipation of renewed difficulties over nuclear issues between the United States and North Korea.⁷ The declaration's wording allowed Japan to remain consistent with the US position on the North Korean nuclear issue. In fact, Koizumi's decision to allow the Japanese abductees to remain in Japan complicated prospects for further progress in Japan–DPRK relations, bringing Japan even closer to the United States as the second North Korean nuclear crisis began to unfold. Ironically, though, Japan's almost exclusive focus on the abduction issue and insistence on addressing the issue as part of the Six-Party Talks became an obstacle to more effective US–Japan coordination on denuclearization.

The 2006 Missile Test and US–Japan Coordination at the United Nations

North Korea's ballistic missile test on July 4, 2006, which occurred near the end of the Koizumi administration, also challenged the dynamics in alliance coordination. At the time, Chief Cabinet Secretary Shinzo Abe, a hardliner within the Koizumi administration who had worked closely with Japanese abductee families, capitalized on the crisis by calling for a decisive public response to North Korea's missile test. Although the long-range Taepodong test was a clear failure, exploding less than a minute following the launch,

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA). *Japan–DPRK Pyongyang Declaration*, Pyongyang, September 17, 2002. http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/n_korea/pmv0209/pyongyang.html (accessed December 10, 2010).

Abe utilized the test to push hard for a strong UN resolution condemning North Korea’s missile tests. Japan’s role as Chair of the UN Security Council also enabled a strong show of leadership in pushing for a tough resolution.

The Security Council’s position in condemning the missile launch was reinforced by North Korean recklessness. Before the launch, North Korea made no effort to disguise it as a satellite test or to issue established warnings to the international community designed to ensure the safety of air and shipping traffic in areas that might be affected by fallout from the launch. As a result, the task of condemning North Korea for testing long-range missiles became relatively straightforward as the issue came to the Security Council for consideration.

During negotiations over the text of the Security Council resolution, Japan attempted to stiffen the language while China tried to water it down. This situation forced the United States to assume the role of mediator between China and Japan: the United States had to persuade China to cooperate while attempting to moderate the Japanese position and maintain close coordination in the context of the Security Council negotiations. Speed was also an important consideration because if negotiations dragged on too long, the eventual Security Council resolution would be perceived as a weak response to North Korea’s missile launch.

The Bush administration ultimately insisted that Japan stop pushing for a stronger resolution in order to secure the adoption of a more moderate statement by the UN Security Council. This situation contrasted with its efforts to restrain Japanese engagement with North Korea in the run-up to the Koizumi visit to Pyongyang, and provided initial indications of growing friction in the US–Japan relationship over engagement with North Korea.

North Korea’s 2006 Nuclear Test and the Six-Party Talks

North Korea’s nuclear test on October 9, 2006, revived UN Security Council deliberations over sanctions against North Korea, but in this case the time necessary to achieve a consensus was relatively short. Within five days, the Security Council agreed on a resolution condemning North Korea, which was quickly followed by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s trips to Tokyo and Seoul on October 17–19 to affirm US commitment to its extended deterrence against North Korean nuclear weapons. Although it was important for the United States to affirm its commitment to Tokyo and Seoul, North Korea’s nuclear test also prompted debate within Japan over developing its own nuclear weapons program or enhancing preemptive capabilities as part of its national security. Over time, this debate spurred doubt about the US commitment to both conventional and extended deterrence. This debate emphasized the deepening anxiety and unease in Japan over US commitments to its defense, and over the widening gap between Japanese expectations and US response in the event of North Korean provocative actions against Japan.

At the end of October 2006, North Korea announced that it would return to the Six-Party Talks. This announcement eliminated the momentum in the international community for implementing UN sanctions under UNSC Resolution 1718 that condemned North Korea’s nuclear test. Specifically, efforts to produce a list of items defined as “luxury goods” that nations would no longer export to North Korea were sidelined, and overall momentum in favor of implementing sanctions stalled. In contrast, Japan unilaterally strengthened its

own sanctions against North Korea, going well beyond the standard that had been imposed under the UN Security Council resolution.

When the Six-Party Talks resumed in mid-December 2006, little progress was made and the round appeared to end in failure. However, an exchange between American and North Korean diplomats following the talks led to the establishment of bilateral talks between US special envoy Christopher Hill and his DPRK counterpart Kim Kye Gwan, which began in Berlin in mid-January 2007. Despite meeting with senior officials from Tokyo prior to his departure for Berlin, Hill failed to inform Japanese officials of the meeting with the North Koreans. This failure unnecessarily increased mistrust between Washington and Tokyo and hampered American efforts to keep Japan constructively engaged in the Six-Party process. Although Hill's meeting in Berlin laid the foundation for the February 13, 2007, agreement on specific action plans for the implementation of the September 2005 Agreed Statement on Principles,⁸ the Government of Japan refused to abide by the negotiated agreement. Specifically, Japan balked at providing heavy fuel oil in exchange for North Korea's pledge to disable the Yongbyon reactor, despite agreement from the other four parties to share the obligation. Even worse, Hill's active efforts to make progress with North Korea became a source of friction with Japanese officials, and as the relationship between Hill and his counterparts in the Government of Japan deteriorated, this friction negatively impacted other aspects of the US–Japan relationship.

Another aspect of the February 2007 agreement, the US promise to remove North Korea from its state sponsors of terrorism list in return for a “complete and correct” declaration of its nuclear facilities, proved even more damaging to US–Japan relations. Because of a 2003 pledge by Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage to Japanese abductee families that the United States would raise the abduction issue in all negotiations with North Korea, Japan regarded the abductee question as having some bearing on the US decision to remove North Korea from the terrorism list.⁹ This impression was reinforced by President Bush's strong show of support for Japan's abductee families, including a personal meeting with abductee Megumi Yokota's mother at the White House in 2006. As a result, Japanese officials saw a resolution of the abductee issue as directly and necessarily linked to any US decision to take North Korea off the terrorism list.¹⁰ When the United States finally removed North Korea from the terrorism list in response to North Korean cooperation in October 2008, Japanese leaders regarded the move as a betrayal. The removal of North Korea from the terrorism list had become a wedge issue by which North Korea had sown distrust and distance between the United States and Japan.

2009 Missile/Nuclear Tests and Japan's Political Transition: Implications for US–Japan Coordination

While the Obama administration continued many of the Bush administration's policy initiatives in Asia and toward North Korea, it made several policy changes based on perceived Bush administration failures. One such “correction” was the adoption of a new

⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. *Initial Actions for the Implementation of the Joint Statement*, February 13, 2007. <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t297463.htm>

⁹ “Armitage says US will raise abductee issue,” *The Daily Yomiuri*, March 7, 2003.

¹⁰ “US removal of NKorea from terror list “extremely regrettable” – Japan FM,” *Kyodo News Service*, October 11, 2008.

“ABC” policy—not the “Anything But Clinton” approach of the Bush administration, but rather the “Anything But Chris [Hill]” approach to dealing with North Korea. This strategy included a renewed emphasis on alliance reassurance as a major policy priority in Northeast Asia. This approach granted Japan the privilege of hosting Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on her first foreign destination trip, as well as allowing Prime Minister Aso to be President Obama’s first foreign White House visitor. Such confidence-building efforts were designed to ensure that the US alliances with Japan and South Korea provided a strong foothold in East Asia as a step towards dealing with North Korea.

Although President Obama declared in his inaugural address that he would offer “an outstretched hand to those who would unclench their fists,”¹¹ North Korea apparently believed that it could achieve more by provocation than accommodation. North Korea’s January 2009 Foreign Ministry statements implied that denuclearization would be an option only if the United States ended its “hostile policy” towards the DPRK, rather than as part of the “action for action” formula that formed the basis for implementing the September 2005 Agreed Statement of Principles.¹² Having decided to undertake a second satellite test, the North Koreans rebuffed the possibility of an early visit to North Korea by Special Representative for North Korea Policy Stephen Bosworth. North Korea’s missile launch on April 5, 2009, sparked a cycle of escalating tension, including a Presidential Statement¹³ from the United Nations Security Council, followed by North Korea’s pledge to break off from the Six-Party Talks and to conduct another nuclear test, which it did on May 25, 2009.¹⁴ The UN Security Council responded with Resolution 1874 that tightened sanctions on North Korean individuals and entities suspected of being involved with the transfer of North Korean fissile materials, widened the ban on weapons exports and luxury goods already in place under UNSC Resolution 1718, and called on member states to “inspect and destroy all banned cargo to and from that country”.¹⁵ In addition, the United States led efforts to implement the resolution by pursuing active implementation of sanctions on any shipments to or from North Korea, including cargo that could be used in North Korean nuclear or missile programs. Meanwhile, the Obama administration conducted diplomatic coordination discussions with other members of the Six-Party Talks, including South Korea and Japan.

Japan’s Domestic Politics: A New Challenge for US–Japan Alliance Coordination Toward North Korea

Historic governmental change in Japan and the advent of a Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ)–led government has thus far had little impact on Japan’s policies toward North Korea, although the overall political environment has been characterized by paralysis and

¹¹ The White House. *President Barack Obama’s Inaugural Address*, January 20, 2009. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/inaugural-address/>

¹² “DPRK Foreign Ministry’s Spokesman Dismisses US Wrong Assertion,” *Korean Central News Agency*, January 13, 2009.

¹³ United Nations Security Council Presidential Statement, April 13, 2009. <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2009/sc9634.doc.htm> (accessed October 1, 2010)

¹⁴ “DPRK Foreign Ministry Vehemently Refutes UNSC’s “Presidential Statement”,” *Korean Central News Agency*, April 14, 2009.

¹⁵ United Nations Security Council Resolution 1874, June 12, 2009. <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2009/sc9679.doc.htm> (accessed October 2, 2010)

indecision. In the last year, officials on both sides of the US–Japan alliance have been focused on contentious plans to build a Futenma Replacement Facility at Camp Schwab near Henoko in Okinawa. This issue has distracted attention from other pressing problems, including policy coordination toward North Korea. Obama administration officials routinely meet with their Japanese foreign ministry counterparts to coordinate on North Korea-related issues, but the impact of such meetings remains limited in part because of the limited impact of the Japanese foreign ministry on the decision-making of top DPJ leaders. Some US officials have described a difficult and slow working-level negotiation process with Japanese counterparts, citing a Japanese bureaucratic structure that is resistant to change and sensitive to potential public responses.¹⁶ Given the stalemate over North Korea’s return to the Six-Party Talks, the broader paralysis in the US–Japan alliance has not had a significant impact on policy coordination toward North Korea. Although the DPJ government so far has not suggested that it will considerably shift Japan’s policy toward North Korea, it is unclear whether the DPJ will maintain the current policy in the future.

Key Issues for US–Japan Coordination and Their Significance for the Alliance

North Korean provocations have clearly influenced the agenda for policy coordination through the US–Japan alliance in at least five aspects. Each of these areas has had a direct impact on the mechanics of alliance coordination, although these influences were often contradictory. In some areas, the United States and Japan are coordinating more closely with each other than ever before; in others, limited coordination reveals discrepancies that, if left unmanaged, could lead to future difficulties for the alliance. Coordination on the following issues has been most directly influenced by efforts to work together to deal with the North Korean nuclear challenge.

Missiles/Missile Defense

North Korean missile development has had a double-edged impact on the US–Japan alliance. On the one hand, the North Korean Taepodong test in 1998 was a major catalyst in Japan’s decision to work more closely with the United States on missile defense. North Korea has provided a convenient pretext for enhanced US–Japan cooperation on missile defense and serves as a proxy for concerns about Chinese military buildup. North Korea’s 2009 satellite launch also provided an opportunity to test progress in the capacities of Japan and the United States to monitor and, if necessary, utilize missile defense systems to shoot down a North Korean missile targeting Japan. Joint work on missile defense has also required Japan and the United States to implement much closer coordination and decision-making on rules for responding to potential missile strikes at an operational level. This coordination is especially pressing given that the US and Japan would likely have minutes, if not seconds, to respond to a missile attack, with little time for deliberation about how to respond in such a crisis.

On the other hand, the missile issue is a potential source of serious division between the United States and Japan, given the differences in their military capability and vulnerability

¹⁶ Emma Chanlett-Avery and Weston S. Konishi, “The Changing US–Japan Alliance: Implications for US Interests,” *Congressional Research Service Report*, July 23, 2009. <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/128832.pdf> (accessed April 1, 2010).

to a potential North Korean missile strike. Tensions caused by these differences became clear as early as 2000, when the United States focused on rolling back North Korea's long-range missile program while initially ignoring North Korea's deployments of mid-range Rodong missiles capable of striking Japan. Japan's relative vulnerability to a North Korean missile strike virtually guarantees that Japan will respond to such issues with a higher degree of sensitivity—and demand more concessions from North Korea—than the United States might. That being said, it is incumbent upon the United States to take actions to reassure the Japanese that the United States is both capable and willing to honor alliance commitments and defend Japan from North Korea and other regional threats. The possibility that North Korean action might prompt Japanese demands for military action while falling short of the US threshold for intervention is a vulnerability that must be acknowledged. Given its history, North Korea may try to exploit this weakness as a means of undermining the US–Japan alliance.

US–Japan Strategic Coordination

The first North Korean nuclear crisis revealed weaknesses in US–Japan alliance coordination, prompting clarification of roles and missions for US and Japanese military forces in the event of rising tensions on the Korean Peninsula or DPRK military action. As a result, Japan has strengthened its capacity to support US forces in the event of a strike against Japan. However, there are still worries that the current level of coordination may be insufficient to respond to new threats, as well as suggestions that Japanese military capabilities should be strengthened further in order to fully participate in national defense.

Likewise, there is the perennial challenge of ensuring effective bilateral political coordination in response to North Korean provocations. The Obama administration has done well thus far in engaging Japan as an active partner in coordinating policies toward North Korea. However, ensuring continued cooperation on North Korean issues will be more difficult if there are renewed prospects for diplomatic progress in US–DPRK relations. This problem is perfectly illustrated by Chris Hill's emphasis on US–DPRK bilateral relations at the expense of effective alliance coordination during the Bush administration. In short, US–Japan alliance coordination faces greater stresses when North Korea is engaged in bilateral diplomatic negotiations with the United States, while North Korean provocations tend to unite the United States and Japan in a common response.

US–Japan–ROK Trilateral Coordination Oversight Group (TCOG)

The establishment of a trilateral US–Japan–ROK coordination mechanism in the late 1990s to deal with North Korea was one of former defense secretary William Perry's notable achievements in his role as special coordinator for North Korea policy during the Clinton administration. Unfortunately, trilateral coordination under TCOG broke down during the transition from the Clinton administration to the Bush administration. This breakdown came about in part on behalf of differences between the Kim Dae Jung administration and the Bush/Koizumi administrations over their preferred policies toward North Korea, but was also affected by rising Japan–ROK tensions over territorial and history issues.

Although the TCOG presented a mechanism for the three parties to manage policy differences on North Korea, it also demonstrated how policy changes in the respective

countries can broadly undermine trilateral coordination efforts.¹⁷ Coordination between Japan and South Korea was destabilized by conflicts stemming from the content of Japanese history textbooks and clashes over the territorial claims over the disputed island of Tokdo/Takeshima, located almost equidistant between Korea and Japan in the Sea of Japan/East Sea. The loss of a trilateral framework for coordinating policy toward North Korea made policy formation and implementation more difficult.

Trilateral coordination between the United States, Japan, and South Korea presents an inherent challenge; one party is always the “odd man out.” Japan found itself excluded in the late 1990s and early 2000s as Presidents Clinton and Kim Dae Jung pursued active engagement with North Korea. South Korea was left out when Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun sought engagement, while President Bush and Prime Minister Koizumi took a more hard-line approach to North Korea.

On the other hand, strengthening trilateral coordination might help to prioritize international cooperation over domestic political challenges in implementing consistent policy toward North Korea. To the extent that the three countries forge a common approach to North Korea based on consensus, trilateral coordination should also provide reassurance to the public of each nation that collective action in response to North Korea is likely to be more effective than a unilateral approach. With the US–Japan alliance preoccupied by the Futenma issue, a formalized trilateral structure of cooperation might help maintain a separate channel in which to focus on other concerns.

Six-Party Talks

The Six-Party framework has become a source of frustration for US–Japan relations, especially in those cases where the United States perceives Japan to be focused solely on pushing its own issues with North Korea via the Six-Party process. At the same time, the Six-Party Joint Statement emphasizes the necessity of an improved Japan–DPRK relationship (along with improved US–DPRK relations) as a prerequisite for progress toward denuclearization. Japan has clearly been frustrated with the failure of the Six-Party process to make the abduction issue a clearly-stated priority. Still, by emphasizing improved Japan–DPRK relations as a step towards denuclearization, the Six-Party joint statement promotes a process whereby, as a practical matter, the abductees issue will have to be resolved. Japan’s failure to participate in energy provision to North Korea under the February 13, 2007, Implementing Agreement has been disappointing, but Japan’s stance is an understandable reflection of domestic political realities. Although North Korea periodically calls for Japan to be removed from the talks, none of the other parties will honor such a demand. The United States has also insisted on Japan–DPRK bilateral talks, despite North Korean resistance, and has actively promoted coordination with Japan as a central component of the Six-Party process.

North Korean Instability

Instability in North Korea would have clear implications for the US–Japan alliance. While the United States and Japan have coordinated military plans for dealing with North Korea

¹⁷ James L. Schoff, “First Interim Report: The Evolution of the TCOG As A Diplomatic Tool,” The Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, November 2004. <http://www.ifpa.org/pdf/updateTCOG.pdf>

in the case of a crisis, Japan needs to be more effectively involved in military contingency plans developed primarily between US Forces Korea and the ROK Ministry of National Defense. Japan’s historical role as a base of logistical support for military conflicts on the Korean Peninsula will likely mean that North Korean instability has implications for US–Japan coordination, so effective regional coordination is essential.

Longer-term, the United States and South Korea agreed in the June 2009 US–ROK Joint Vision Statement that they seek “a durable peace on the peninsula... leading to peaceful reunification on the principles of free democracy and a market economy.”¹⁸ US commitment to this specific objective raises important questions about how US–Japan alliance coordination can be utilized in support of the mission. To the extent that the government of Japan views Korean reunification on these terms as in Japan’s national interest, it may be necessary to identify specific roles for Japan in bilateral agreements with South Korea, through the US–Japan alliance, or as part of a trilateral US–Japan–ROK coordinating framework. These issues must be addressed in US–Japan policy conversations now so that Japanese interests can be recognized and Japan can contribute to common goals.

Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the influence of North Korean provocative actions on the US–Japan alliance over the past fifteen years. It has also considered specific aspects of North Korea policy implementation that require Japan’s active involvement, and therefore necessitate coordination via the US–Japan alliance and/or with close reference to US–ROK policy coordination. Although North Korean provocations have often been intended to sow dissent between the United States, South Korea, and Japan, this paper concludes that in most cases North Korea’s provocative actions have strengthened US policy coordination with its allies.

Still, further work is required to strengthen US–Japan–ROK trilateral policy coordination. While both the US–ROK and US–Japan alliances have undergone significant transformation in recent years and seek to expand their scope of cooperation, the three countries have yet to establish a new joint rationale for trilateral cooperation on common security challenges. Enhanced US–Japan–ROK coordination would strengthen regional coordination on North Korean nuclear and broader issues, including management of China’s rise. Such coordination appears to support the interests of both the United States and Japan, and should be enhanced through mechanisms that strengthen the capacity and effectiveness of the US–Japan alliance.

¹⁸ The White House. *Joint Vision for the Alliance of the United States of America and the Republic of Korea*, Washington DC, June 16, 2009. http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Joint-vision-for-the-alliance-of-the-United-States-of-America-and-the-Republic-of-Korea/ (accessed March 10, 2010)