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## **HOW SHOULD JAPAN DEAL WITH NORTH KOREA?**

*Tetsuya Endo*

Pyongyang was particularly provocative toward Seoul during the last couple of years. It conducted a series of ballistic missile launches and nuclear tests, fired artillery rounds into the Yellow Sea, shot to death a South Korean tourist at the Diamond Mountain resort, sank the South Korean Navy ship *Cheonan*, and bombarded Yeonpyeong Island. Since the beginning of this year, however, the country has suddenly changed its attitude and begun seeking dialogue. Pyongyang has proposed to resume talks with Seoul on Red Cross-related issues, tourism at Diamond Mountain and high-level dialogue, including at the military level.

*The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.*

Pyongyang is also approaching Washington by inviting US experts and Bill Richardson, a former governor of New Mexico and former US ambassador to the United Nations who keeps close ties with North Korea.

This carrot-and-stick policy of North Korea, however, is nothing new, just another version of its traditional diplomatic pattern. The international community – Japan, the United States and South Korea in particular – has so far repeatedly responded to Pyongyang's hardline stance and escalating brinkmanship diplomacy with conciliatory policies yielding to domestic pressures in the countries concerned. This has at least made Pyongyang confident that its hardline stance has paid off. Inserting apparently flexible stances between hardline policies is a clever strategy by North Korea, and we should be prepared for a repeat of the pattern.

Behind such diplomatic stance lie the country's tactical and strategic objectives and motives, some of which are getting notice recently. The first is the desire to consolidate a post-Kim Jong Il regime as swiftly as possible. For this purpose, Pyongyang wants first of all to secure the support of the military and strengthen its military capabilities under its Military-First Policy. Nuclear and missile development is an important part of this strategy. North Korea has also declared its intention to reconstruct its economy and improve people's living standards, but running after the two hares of bolstering the military and people's livelihood will be a virtually impossible task. Another aspect of this effort is the tightening of control on ideology. Controlling the flow of information is becoming increasingly difficult but, in light of the waves of unrest in the Middle East, the North Korean regime may be feeling yet further need for tightening control. Be that as it may, Pyongyang must be breathlessly watching events in the Middle East, none of which it has allowed to be directly reported within the country.

The second factor is relations with China. Placed under UN economic sanctions, North Korea has considered stronger ties with China vitally important for its survival. Still emphasizing on the surface close ties between the two countries, however, North Korea

is not free from worries about its ever-expanding dependency on China.

The third factor is relations with the United States and South Korea. The utmost priority of North Korean diplomacy is to negotiate with Washington to replace the current Armistice Agreement with a peace treaty. It expects that that will lead to the withdrawal of US forces and their nuclear umbrella from the Korean peninsula. North Korea also wants to obtain economic assistance from South Korea, but it recognizes North-South relations, along with Japan-North Korea relations, as a dependent variable of the US-North Korea relationship, giving priority to improving the latter. Meanwhile, successive South Korean governments have steered developments in North-South relations in order to enhance presidents' records of achievement while in office, and North Korea may take skillful advantage of this tendency.


How then should the international community, Japan in particular, deal with North Korea? Below are some of my proposals (listed in random order):

Firstly, we should not take Pyongyang's request for dialogue at face value. It must be accompanied by concrete actions. We must maintain consistent policies without responding to the country's hardline stance with conciliatory policies.

Secondly, we need to maintain and strengthen ties among Tokyo, Washington and Seoul. For this purpose, we need to coordinate policies and actions among the three countries. Apparently, Pyongyang is alarmed by the fact that its provocative military acts have bolstered the trilateral bond despite its intention to divide the three countries.

Thirdly, the three countries, whether in concert or respectively, should continue to make efforts to engage Beijing, the lifeline of Pyongyang.

Fourthly, Japan should improve its own information-gathering capability. That North Korea is following in the footsteps of previous diplomatic patterns does not necessarily mean that the country's domestic situation remains unchanged. Since domestic circumstances and foreign policy are in correlative relationship (albeit not a perfect one), neglecting signs of domestic change can result in errors in analyzing and

predicting North Korea's foreign policy. Japan should therefore strengthen its ability to accurately judge North Korean moves (i.e., its information-gathering and analysis capabilities) in addition to its ability to make clear-headed responses. 

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