



Strategic risk assessment in East Asia: A Japanese view

Policy brief

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The Asia-Pacific Strategic Risks project convenes government officials, experts, and practitioners from South Korea, Japan, Australia, and the UK to discuss how changing threat perceptions impact new and ongoing proliferation challenges and what policy solutions can address them, including steps to encourage strategic restraint, greater collaboration and carefully honed nuclear risk reduction diplomacy. This is a joint project between the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network and the European Leadership Network. The opinions articulated in the report represent the views of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network or the European Leadership Network, or any of their members.

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Executive summary

In December 2022, the Japanese government unveiled a set of key strategic documents—the National Security Strategy (NSS), National Defense Strategy (NDS), and Defense Buildup Program (DBP)—signifying a significant shift in Japan’s defense posture in response to a complex and severe security environment in the Indo-Pacific region. The documents highlight security challenges from North Korea and Russia but identify China as Japan’s most substantial strategic challenge in the Indo-Pacific due to its expansionist policies, military activities, and economic coercion.

Under the leadership of Shinzo Abe, Japan adopted a proactive approach to address the China challenge, emphasising both diplomatic and defense policies. Collective self-defense and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy played critical roles in this strategy.

In the post-Abe era, Japan, led by Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, aims to bolster its defense capabilities in response to a more severe security environment. The focus of Japan’s response is on enhancing counter-strike capabilities to deter potential Chinese offensive military operations as well as North Korean threats.

The Japan-US alliance remains a cornerstone of Japan’s security policy, particularly in addressing a potential Taiwan contingency. Deterrence is particularly challenging, given the evolving nature of China’s military actions, which include intimidation, coercion, and military exercises.

Japan has become increasingly apprehensive about China’s military buildup and aggressive actions, with almost 80% of the Japanese public expressing concerns about a potential crisis involving Taiwan. However, support for deploying Japanese Self-Defense Forces in such a scenario remains relatively low.

To address these concerns, Japan is developing long-range strike capabilities, including the introduction of Tomahawk missiles and the deployment of missile systems. The Japan-US alliance is actively working on coordinating operational plans and conducting training exercises to enhance readiness and deterrence in response to the deteriorating security environment, particularly in the Taiwan Strait.

These combined efforts underscore the critical need to maintain peace and stability in the region and to deter any attempts to change the status quo through military means. The Kishida administration has also outlined its commitment to strengthening engagement with like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific region, guided by the FOIP vision.

Introduction

The National Defense Strategy of Japan claims that North Korea has acquired the technological ability to equip ballistic missiles with a nuclear warhead and possesses the capacity to launch an attack on Japan.

In December 2022, three key strategic documents were unveiled by the Japanese government. These included the National Security Strategy (NSS), National Defense Strategy (NDS), and Defense Buildup Program (DBP). Under the leadership of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, a decision was made to “conduct a fundamental reinforcement” of Japan’s defence capabilities within a five-year period, responding to the challenging and complex nature of the international security landscape.¹

The new NSS identifies China, North Korea, and Russia as security challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. In the three 2022 strategic documents, China receives the main attention as the first country cited as a security challenge in the Indo-Pacific region. China’s current expansionist policy, military activities, and other actions, including economic coercion, have become significant concerns for Japan and the international community. The 2022 NSS describes China as “an unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge [sic]” to Japan and the international rule-based order.²

North Korea’s military activities also pose a “grave and imminent threat” to Japan’s national security.³ Since Kim Jong Un came to power, Pyongyang has more actively developed missile technology, showing a clear intention to bolster its nuclear capability both in quantity and in quality. Pyongyang had conducted four nuclear tests and fired over 240 ballistic missiles and other projectiles.⁴ The National Defense Strategy of Japan claims that North Korea has acquired the technological ability to equip ballistic missiles with a nuclear warhead and possesses the capacity to launch an attack on Japan.⁵

As a consequence, Japan is planning for three major external security risks and contingencies:

First, China’s assertive activities in the East China Sea and South China Sea, particularly in the territorial waters over which both China and Japan claims sovereignty, threatening the security of sea lanes.

Second, the situation in which tensions rise over the Taiwan Strait and an armed conflict erupts between China and Taiwan. This Taiwan contingency is sometimes referred to by Japanese politicians as “Japan’s contingency.” In this instance, if the United States supports Taiwan, Japan would be required to cooperate with the United States. A Taiwan contingency would also threaten the safety of maritime routes for Japan.

Furthermore, if China gains dominance in the South China Sea and advances beyond the First Island Chain into the Western Pacific, expanding the freedom of action of its strategic nuclear submarines and enhancing its nuclear deterrence against the United States, the United States’ influence in the Indo-Pacific region would decline. Japan and other US allies and partners will be forced to take action, risking their own security.

Third, is the Korean Peninsula contingency. In recent years, North Korea has been rapidly improving its missile and nuclear capabilities and has recently changed its policy toward South Korea, giving up on unification and viewing South Korea as an adversary. If North Korea abandons its engagement with the United States, further escalation of tensions on the Korean Peninsula

is a distinct possibility. In a situation where dialogue among key stakeholders, including South Korea, North Korea, and the United States, is critically missing, such escalation could lead to a catastrophic situation.

This paper analyses the latter two cases which are considered particularly risky from the Japanese government's perspective, assessing the crisis scenarios, their implications, and Japan's response.

Strategic risk scenarios for Japan

The fragile understanding of the status quo in Sino-Taiwanese relations suggests to Japanese thinkers that the risk of armed conflict over the Taiwan Strait may be increasing.

Taiwan contingency

There are growing concerns that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) may invade Taiwan around 2027, when the People's Liberation Army completes its goal of becoming a strong military force on the 100th anniversary of its founding, to achieve the unification of China.⁶ The CCP regards its sovereignty over Taiwan as "fundamental interest" and states that "China's sovereignty and territorial integrity brook no division" in the Anti-Secession Law enacted in March 2005. The law clearly states that the use of force is possible when the possibility of peaceful unification has been completely lost, allowing the state to take non-peaceful methods and other necessary measures to protect national sovereignty and territorial integrity.⁷ Many in Japan believe that China will pursue the *status quo*, not seeking forced unification, but will prefer a situation that does not allow Taiwan to become independent.⁸

The increased frequency of Chinese military aircraft flying across the Sino-Taiwanese median line and the conduct of military exercises in response to US House Speaker Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022 seem to suggest to Japan that China is changing its definition of the *status quo* and expanding the realm of its vested interests. From China's perspective, Pelosi's visit to Taiwan and other actions were an attempt by Taiwan and the United States to change the *status quo*. The military exercises therefore can be considered a signal that the *status quo* will not be allowed to change and could also serve as a rehearsal for a maritime blockade of Taiwan. Moreover, the military exercises can also be seen by the Japanese media as a demonstration of the threat posed to Japan's sea lanes of communication, signaling that China will not tolerate intervention by external powers in Taiwan.⁹

The fragile understanding of the *status quo* in Sino-Taiwanese relations suggests to Japanese thinkers that the risk of armed conflict over the Taiwan Strait may be increasing. Further below, this paper outlines the conditions for a Chinese invasion of Taiwan from two aspects: an assessment of military capabilities and China's political will.

Capabilities

In the report of the October 2022 Communist Party Congress, President Xi Jinping stated that China will quickly elevate "our people's armed forces to world-class standards" and that "it will achieve the goals for the centenary of the People's Liberation Army in 2027", which coincides with the end of his third term; "establish a strong system of strategic deterrence, increase the proportion of new-domain forces with new combat capabilities, speed up the development of unmanned, intelligent combat capabilities, and promote coordinated development and application of the network information system."¹⁰

The general characteristics of China and Taiwan's military power can be considered as follows:

Although China has overwhelming military power in terms of land forces, its capability for a direct land invasion of the main island of Taiwan is limited at present. However, in recent years, China has steadily improved its land invasion capability through

A demonstrated lack of US ability to restrain China could result in the decline of the credibility of extended nuclear deterrence and a decrease in Japan's confidence in the US commitment.

the construction and commissioning of large landing ships. The units in charge of invasion strait operations against Taiwan are the People's Liberation Army's Eastern and Southern Theater Commands. Including reinforcements, a total of approximately 420,000 troops from both battle zones are said to be available for the Taiwan front. The Taiwanese forces number approximately 90,000, which means that the Chinese forces have 4.6 times the ground forces. There are also increasingly large disparities in air and sea power, as China is deploying more fifth and sixth generation fighter jets and building up its naval forces at breakneck pace. This development has forced Taiwan to focus on asymmetric capabilities such as the development of a stealth corvette.¹¹

Taiwan is also reportedly aiming to develop surface-to-surface missiles with 1,200 km range and introduce the long-range air-to-surface missile AGM-158 from the United States. In addition, Taiwan is strengthening its ballistic missile defence by upgrading PAC-2s to PAC-3s and introducing new PAC-3s from the United States. However, China possesses a large number of short-range ballistic missiles, including as many as 1,000 that are believed to have a range that can hit Taiwan, and Taiwan is believed to lack effective means to deal with these missiles.

Meanwhile, if China were to invade Taiwan, it would need to cross the Taiwan Strait to support the operation. The Chinese navy has eight dock-type transport ships, 30 tank landing ships, and three helicopter-carrying assault landing ships as of 2022, but these alone are capable of transporting only about 20,000 soldiers simultaneously.

Regarding its nuclear capability, it is estimated that China currently possesses between 350 and 400 nuclear warheads. The US Department of Defense has projected that China intends to have 700 warheads by 2027, 1,000 by 2030, and possibly 1,500 by 2035. Since the United States currently deploys about 1,550 warheads, if that number remains unchanged, parity will be achieved by 2035 (although the parity may not be achieved only through the equal number of warheads).¹²

The United States needs stable deterrence relationships on two fronts, in with Russia in Europe and with China in Asia, but finding a stable equilibrium among the three countries will be challenging. Moreover, any US recognition of mutual vulnerability toward China means that in exchange for stability in US-China relations, the United States will lose the ability to restrain China's assertive behavior in East Asia at the regional level – or at least its allies, including Japan, will interpret it as such. A demonstrated lack of ability to restrain China could result in the decline of the credibility of extended nuclear deterrence and a decrease in Japan's confidence in the US commitment.

Allied support

The credibility of the US commitment to Taiwan's defence is an important factor in determining whether or not China will invade Taiwan. The US commitment under the US Taiwan Relations Act is not a formal alliance, but rather a unilateral US statement of intent to support Taiwan. Unlike the Japan-US alliance, since there is no common command and communications system or operational plan between the United States and Taiwan, it is not easy for the

United States and Taiwan to conduct joint operations. In addition, the United States has traditionally maintained an ambiguous stance, neither explicitly stating nor denying military support for Taiwan. However, it could be argued that the United States has come to express its willingness to support Taiwan more clearly under the Biden administration¹³

In Japan, concern has grown over China's military buildup and assertive actions to change the status quo, including in the South and East China Seas. In recent polls, nearly 80% of the Japanese public were concerned about a Taiwan contingency. However, only 22% support the deployment of the Self-Defense Forces to fight alongside US forces in such a scenario. Meanwhile, 44% support the idea of not deploying the Self-Defense Forces except for providing logistical support, including supplying arms and ammunition to US forces, with 51% expressing disapproval. Additionally, support for allowing US forces to use Japanese bases without the involvement of the SDF was 48%, while 47% disapproved. As for the view that Japan should not be involved militarily at all, including allowing US forces to use its bases in Japan, 47% of respondents agreed and 49% disagreed¹⁴

Domestic political factors

The risk of China using force against Taiwan, influenced by domestic economic and political conditions, warrants careful consideration. First, if China experiences a severe downturn in its domestic economy leading to widespread public dissatisfaction, this discontent could be redirected towards the ruling Communist government. In such a scenario, the leadership might be tempted to use an assertive foreign policy, such as using force against Taiwan, as a means to rally nationalistic support and deflect attention from domestic issues.

Second, the personal commitment of President Xi Jinping to the unification of Taiwan with the mainland may play a crucial role. Xi's aspirations for Taiwan's unification are not only a matter of national policy but also a significant element of his political legacy. Achieving this unification could enhance his legitimacy and charisma as a leader, especially amidst other domestic challenges. Thus, Xi's determination in this regard could significantly increase the likelihood of China resorting to force as a means to achieve its objectives concerning Taiwan. This approach must be understood as part of a broader strategy where domestic imperatives intermingle with international ambitions, reflecting the complex dynamics at play within China's political leadership.

Korean Peninsula contingency

Capabilities

Japan's National Security Strategy of December 2022 expressed North Korea's threat as "North Korea's military activities pose an even more grave and imminent threat to Japan's national security than ever before."¹⁵

The expansion of North Korea's nuclear arsenal is a serious concern to Japan. In the 2022 Defense White Paper issued

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in February 2023, South Korea updated its estimate of North Korea's weapons-grade plutonium stockpile to 70 kilograms from the previous assessment of 50 kilograms.¹⁶ North Korea's miniaturised nuclear weapons, especially low-powered nuclear weapons (so-called tactical nuclear weapons), are serious threats. From the South Korean perspective, the development of tactical maneuverable nuclear weapons, combined with North Korea's recent policy change (i.e., Kim Jong Un's instruction for the identification of South Korea as an adversary and the amendment of the Constitution accordingly), has increased the risk of the use of nuclear weapons by North Korea in a Korean Peninsula contingency, as well as in a potential attack on Japan.¹⁷ However, the more "imminent" threat to Japan remains the rapid upgrade of North Korean missile capabilities.

North Korea is improving both qualitatively and quantitatively its missile operational capabilities; the development of HGVs warheads to improve BMD breakthrough capability and the longer range ICBMs such as the Hwasong-17,18 are notable examples of qualitative improvements. In addition, the series of missile launch tests have demonstrated the improved concealment, survivability, and immediacy of launches through 1) multiple simultaneous launches, continuous launches at extremely short intervals, and launches from different points to specific targets, 2) launches from various platforms at arbitrary points, i.e., improved launch concealment and immediacy, and 3) solid-fuel uses.¹⁸

With regard to its actual missile operational capabilities, North Korea may be planning to launch saturation attacks. For example, looking back at North Korea's missile launches in 2023, the country launched a missile every month from January to September, launching 15 to 16 cruise missiles during this period, including the Hwasal 1 and 2 types, on five occasions.¹⁹

North Korea's policy changes

North Korea's language toward South Korea has become more hostile. At the end of 2023, Kim Jong Un described South Korea as a "hostile" state and the relationship between the two Koreas as "a relationship between two hostiles at war."²⁰ He also declared that 2024 was a new heyday for intensified war preparations. On January 15, 2024, Kim Jong Un made a speech at the Supreme People's Assembly that South Korea should be considered the "principal enemy," and that the Constitution should be amended accordingly. He also decided to abolish the three institutions for North-South dialogue and cooperation.²¹

It is not unusual for North Korea to use belligerent language, but an article by Robert Carlin and Siegfried Hecker warns of the potential outbreak of a second Korean War based on two grounds: first, that North Korea had long sought to normalise relations with the United States, but had eventually given up hope of doing so; second, that the international environment had turned favorable to North Korea.²²

Whether or not Carlin and Hecker are correct in their view that Kim Jong Un has decided to go to war, it is certainly necessary to question the view that obtaining security assurances from the United States is an important national goal for North Korea. It is possible that North Korea may judge that its progress in nuclear

and missile development has given it the ability to strike the United States in a way that could serve as a deterrent. This perception could lead to a situation in which regional conflicts could easily erupt.

Assessing risks

China could sway Japanese public sentiment against collaborating with the US military by asserting that Japan, due to its coordination with the nuclear-armed US, no longer qualifies as a non-nuclear weapon state, and hence is no longer eligible for negative security assurance from China.

Taiwan contingency

In Japan, there are two views on the probability of a Taiwan contingency scenario: one is that it is a high-risk scenario in the short term, and the other is that it would be difficult for Beijing to make the decision to invade Taiwan at this point in time.

In terms of capabilities, a simple comparison of the size of China's land, sea, and air forces with Taiwan's shows that China already has about four times the force of Taiwan, and the possibility of an invasion cannot be ruled out. However, for the battle to continue, China would need to secure transport capabilities and maritime and undersea superiority to support it across the Taiwan Strait. On the flip side, to prevent a Chinese armed invasion of Taiwan, in addition to developing Taiwan's own defences, the United States and its allies would be required to tap such Chinese cross-strait supply capabilities and prevent them from landing in Taiwan. If China finds it difficult to secure such a continuous supply route, the likelihood of a military invasion of Taiwan will diminish.

Conversely, if China decides to invade Taiwan, it would likely launch an offensive to reduce the ability of the United States and its allies to maintain air and sea control over the Taiwan Strait in the early stages of a military operation. China's medium-range ballistic and cruise missiles constitute an A2/AD capability that would keep the US Navy out of the region. It would also neutralise US military assets already deployed in the region.²³ In other words, US military bases in Japan would become targets of Chinese missile attacks at the early stage of conflict. In such a scenario, while both the United States and China would intend to avoid an all-out war or the escalation to a retaliatory nuclear attack on their respective mainlands, the United States would need to position its offensive assets beyond the reach of Chinese intermediate-range missiles. Concurrently, Japan might need to employ its long-range strike capabilities for a counterattack. Such measures would curtail China's potential for a second strike and diminish its capacity to sustain combat.

At present, the US military lacks adequate countermeasures. Japan, as per its National Security Strategy released in December 2022, has chosen to develop a long-range strike or "counter-strike capability."²⁴ This capability includes the introduction of Tomahawk missiles and the deployment of its own missile systems. However, building such a defence capacity will be time-consuming. While China's capabilities are not fully matured either, there are concerns that China might target Taiwan before the Japan-US alliance is adequately prepared.

Furthermore, if China aims to hinder the use of bases in Japan by US forces or the logistical support provided by Japan to US operations, effectively trying to dissuade Japan and the United States from backing Taiwan, it might resort to cognitive warfare to sow discord among the Japanese public opinion. For instance, China could sway Japanese public sentiment against collaborating with the US military by asserting that Japan, due to its coordination with the nuclear-armed US, no longer qualifies as a non-nuclear weapon state, and hence is no longer eligible for negative security assurance from China (or Japan could become a target of Chinese nuclear strikes), essentially declaring that Japan could be a nuclear target. As Japan's provision of rear support and escorts as well

as the protection of US assets in Japan would be essential for US effective support for Taiwan, decoupling Japan from the United States, by raising the fear of entrapment among the Japanese public, would be effective for China to make its operation over Taiwan viable.

North Korean contingency risks

With regard to a Korean Peninsula contingency, recent policy changes by North Korea and the buildup of its nuclear capability are less likely to immediately lead to North Korea's use of force against South Korea. Rather, these developments may mean that North Korea will move from an approach of pursuing the survival of its own regime through engagement with the United States to a policy of eliminating interference from the United States on its own, potentially through cooperation with Russia and China. In addition, while the gap in economic power between South and North Korea continues to widen, even if North Korea were to pursue reunification by force and capture South Korea militarily, it would face no prospects for running a unified state, but rather greater difficulties in terms of the survival of its regime.

It is also important to consider the constraints facing the United States, which could affect North Korea's calculations. In the event of a Korean Peninsula contingency, North Korea might judge that US power has declined, and that simultaneous crises in Europe and the Middle East make it impossible for the United States to intervene in a Korean Peninsula crisis without exceeding its capacity. Furthermore, division in US public opinion and the US government's potential inability to decide on intervention could also occur. Such factors on the US side could potentially provoke military actions by North Korea.

It would be too one-sided to view the purpose of North Korea's nuclear program as a means to raise tensions in order to obtain what it wants to acquire diplomatically. Of course, it is also possible that North Korea is trying to raise the stakes as a bargaining chip against the United States. On the other hand, the fact that the United States has lost numerous opportunities to engage with North Korea in the past due to domestic failures to build consensus and other factors may lead North Korea to lower its expectations for US engagement policy and take a more hardline stance.²⁵ If so, some are skeptical that North Korea will now adopt a policy of halting its nuclear and missile development in exchange for successful engagement with the United States. In this sense, a series of policy changes are rather inevitable, and eventually, North Korea would place less emphasis on engagement with the United States than it has in the past.

If North Korea were to use military force on the Korean Peninsula, Japan's Self-Defense Forces would not participate in combat operations with US and South Korean forces. However, North Korea would seek to prevent Japanese logistical support in order to degrade the sustainability of US military operations. To do so, it may use nuclear threats against Japan, as it would in the event of a Taiwan contingency.

In particular, recent improvements in missile capabilities have raised the nuclear threat that North Korea poses to Japan, and

may have lowered the threshold of nuclear use against Japan. The priority for North Korea is to secure regime survival, and it is keenly aware of the risk of decapitation or strategic strike from the United States, in case it would commit a nuclear strike on South Korea. Even though North Korea appears to have given up the goal of unifying the Peninsula, it would hope to retain its self-claimed political legitimacy over South Korea by governing a Korean nation. The use of nuclear weapon against fellow Koreans would significantly undermine that legitimacy, while the moralistic hurdle for nuclear use is lower against Japan than South Korea. Additionally, raising nuclear stakes vis-à-vis Japan, or using nuclear blackmail against Japan, could decouple Japan from Korean Peninsula affairs. To make blackmail credible, North Korea would have to make the threat of using nuclear weapons against Japan plausible. For these reasons, North Korea may have a lower threshold for nuclear use against Japan, compared to South Korea.

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Possible responses: A few recommendations

Some in Japan argue that given China's designation of a military exercise zone encompassing Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and its missile launches within, a mere diplomatic protest would not suffice as a signal of resolve.

Strengthening defence capabilities

What policy measures is Japan taking or considering to prevent the two scenarios from unfolding? Japan aims to bolster its deterrence-by-denial capabilities through missile defence and increased homeland resilience, complemented by its deterrence-by-punishment capabilities through the development of long-range strike capabilities (referred to as "counter-strike capability" in Japanese official documents). While Japan's long-range strike capability alone might not deter China, a coordinated effort between Japan and the US will enhance the Japan-US alliance's regional response capacity. This synergy will make it challenging for China to forcibly alter the *status quo* during a potential Taiwan crisis.²⁶ Moreover, to ensure a swift and effective response during crises such as a Taiwan contingency, some experts advocate for the Japan-US alliance to collaboratively develop operational plans that allow both nations to seamlessly coordinate their assets and apply an escalation deterrence strategy. Meanwhile, it might take some more time before Japan-US coordination in counter-strike capabilities would become robust enough to effectively deter China.²⁷

To persuade China of Japan and US resolve against forced *status quo* changes, it is essential to send clear signals even during peacetime. Some in Japan argue that given China's designation of a military exercise zone encompassing Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and its missile launches within, a mere diplomatic protest would not suffice as a signal of resolve. Instead, a stronger counter-response, like a joint Japan-US military exercises, is necessary to truly convey commitment and deterrence.²⁸

According to Japan's 2022 NDS, defence capabilities should be built on the principle that deterrence is necessary to make adversaries realise that it is difficult to unilaterally change the status quo by force, and rapidly respond to the invasion, should it occur, in a tailored and seamless manner, while building up Japan's own defence capabilities accordingly.²⁹

The NDS views this response as the transformation of warfare, which Japan needs to adapt to. In addition to the traditional air, sea, and land invasions, there are large-scale missile attacks using ballistic and cruise missiles with improved precision strike capabilities, deployment of hybrid warfare including information warfare such as false flag operations, and asymmetric attacks using space, cyber, and electromagnetic domains, as well as unmanned assets. Furthermore, new ways of warfare are emerging that combine verbal and active signals of nuclear coercion. The ability to respond to these new ways of warfare is a major issue in building future defence capabilities.

Based on this assessment, the NDS calls for the following capabilities: as capabilities to deter or eliminate an adversarial force from a distance in order to deter the invasion itself, (1) standoff defence capability and (2) integrated air and missile defence capability; as capabilities to acquire superiority and secure asymmetric superiority across various domains, in the event that deterrence is breached, (3) unmanned defence capability, (4) cross-domain operation capability, as well as (5) command, control, and intelligence-related functions; and as capabilities to continue to

operate quickly and persistently and dissuade the other side from its aggressive intentions, (6) mobile deployment capability and civil protection, and (7) sustainability and resiliency. These seven areas of capability, as noted above, are compatible with the US concept of integrated deterrence presented in the US National Defense Strategy.

The strengthening of alliance coordination is also a part of solution. At the two-plus-two meeting in January 2023, Japan and the United States “decided to deepen bilateral cooperation toward the effective employment of Japan’s counterstrike capabilities in close coordination with the United States.”³⁰

If Japan can fulfill its primary responsibility for its own defence and eventually stop or eliminate an invasion early and far away, it would mean that Japan will have the capabilities necessary for its own defence, and the United States will be able to devote more forces and resources to the defence of Taiwan.

Strengthening trilateral Japan-US-ROK coordination

Linking the US-ROK alliance with the Japan-US alliance is indispensable to ensure the effectiveness of countering North Korea, which has been enhancing its nuclear and missile capabilities and adopting a more hostile posture. Furthermore, cooperation between the US, Japan, and South Korea is also necessary in the event of a Taiwan contingency, and is also considered effective in deterring China from intensifying its coercive actions and moves to change the *status quo*.

In August 2023, the leaders of the United States, Japan, and South Korea held a summit meeting at Camp David, where the strengthening of the partnership between the United States, Japan, and South Korea was enshrined in three documents: the “Camp David Principles,” “the Spirit of Camp David,” and “Commitment to Consult.”³¹

The “Principles” document states that the three countries affirm a shared vision and that their partnership will be based on shared values. In “The Spirit” document, the three countries agreed to take measures towards strengthening security cooperation and broadening cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, and “generating the common capacity required to ensure that the Indo-Pacific is thriving, connected, resilient, stable, and secure.”³² In the area of security cooperation, the report outlines a multi-year trilateral exercise plan which will be built upon the success of ballistic missile defence and anti-submarine warfare exercises, cooperation on ballistic missile defence including real-time missile warfare data exchange, trilateral working group on DPRK cyber activities, enhanced information sharing and coordination, and countering foreign information manipulation. These cooperative efforts are expected to be institutionalised and sustainable, aimed at reducing the risk of security cooperation breakdown among participating countries due to political circumstances in each country.

In the “Commitment to Consult” document, the three countries reaffirmed their commitment to consult “in an expeditious manner, to coordinate our responses to regional challenges, provocations, and threats affecting our collective interests and security.”

However, it is unlikely that South Korea would take joint military action in the event of a Taiwan contingency. One can assume that a chain of contingencies in the Taiwan Strait and on the Korean Peninsula would be considered.

Threat reduction through strategic communications

If Japan's relations with China and North Korea make it difficult for both sides to engage in candid and constructive dialogue about their mutual strategic concerns and interests, or the desirable nature of the relationship, Japan, the United States, and South Korea need to strengthen their deterrence posture through capacity building and enhanced coordination as described above. Even in the midst of such a response, however, it is essential to pursue strategic dialogue as an effort to avoid the risk of escalation of crises in the short term and of an arms race in the medium and long term.

The key is to avoid sending the wrong signals to China and North Korea and providing incentives for escalation based on misunderstandings and miscalculations. To this end, it is necessary to improve deterrence and contingency planning capabilities, as already mentioned, to show that even if China and North Korea take military action, they will not achieve their objectives through such actions. However, improving deterrence and contingency planning capabilities alone is not enough. In the short term, it is necessary to establish communication for crisis management to avoid inadvertent escalation due to misunderstanding or miscalculation, thereby avoiding unwanted consequences for both sides in the event of a crisis. In the medium to long term, strategic dialogue is needed to address threats and concerns for both sides, to reduce relative threats, and to lower nuclear salience in the strategic relationship.

While building military capabilities is crucial for deterrence, it should also serve as a platform to initiate strategic dialogue with China. A lack of mutual understanding of strategic intentions, thought processes, and capabilities between the United States and China, as well as between Japan and China could result in ill-informed decisions in respective states. To circumvent unintentional escalations and maintain stability during crises, it is vital to establish reliable dialogue channels and crisis hotlines.

There are existing communication channels for crises between the United States and China, as well as Japan and China. However, their effectiveness remains questionable.³³ These channels have been co-opted into China's escalation strategy, used as political instruments to intensify situations by strategically deactivating them. To ensure these hotlines serve their primary role of crisis prevention, it is crucial to build confidence through regular communication.

Strategic dialogues are also expected to serve as a platform for both sides to understand each other's concerns and build mutual understanding on what a stable strategic relationship should look like for stability and future threat reduction.

In a scenario where such an "arms control" approach³⁴ is adopted, the major dilemma that remains is how allowing North Korea

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to change the *status quo* through the acquisition of nuclear weapons, in violation of the NPT, IAEA safeguards agreements, and successive UN Security Council resolutions, will affect the regional and even global nuclear non-proliferation order.³⁵ In other words, in order to control the risks associated with North Korea's nuclear weapons, the world would have to accept a violation of the rules of the international non-proliferation regime as a *de facto* new normal. This acceptance would further impress upon non-nuclear weapons states in and outside the region the inequality of the nonproliferation regime, and would justify and perpetuate the response by power (or deterrence) against nuclear risk. From this perspective, while acknowledging the need to take North Korea's concerns into account, a crisis management approach through arms control is only a transitional measure, and negotiations must continue toward the goal of "denuclearisation."

Conclusion

Amid increased awareness of China's willingness to use its military assets for intimidation or coercion of other states, not just for political signalling, Tokyo has shifted the focus of its national security strategy to strengthening a deterrence architecture surrounding Japan and throughout the Indo-Pacific region, guided by a series of strategic documents including the NSS and NDS, along with documents agreed through bilateral and mini-lateral security consultation mechanisms, including Japan-US and Japan-US-ROK consultations. By doing so, Tokyo seeks to maintain a strategic balance in the region that is favourable to itself and like-minded countries so that China and North Korea would not be tempted to use their forces to change the *status quo*.

Yet, while building military capabilities is crucial for deterrence, it should also serve as a platform to initiate strategic dialogue. A lack of mutual understanding of strategic intentions, thought processes, and capabilities between the United States and China, as well as between Japan and China, could result in ill-informed decisions in respective states. To circumvent unintentional escalations and maintain stability during crises, it is vital to establish reliable dialogue channels and crisis hotlines.

Given the lack of transparency surrounding China and North Korea's military buildup trends and political intentions, Japan must strive to build a deterrence architecture and create a network of regional security cooperation to prevent crisis escalation, while at the same time seek dialogue with China and North Korea, if possible, regarding the strategic interests of both sides, promoting mutual understanding as a guard rail for crisis management, and creating a trend toward threat reduction.

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