

JAPAN'S NORTH KOREAN CONUNDRUM

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Executive Summary

1. Japan's North Korean conundrum lies in the growing threat of North Korea's ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons, the unresolved abduction of several Japanese citizens by the North and the fear of being "left out in the cold" diplomatically by its US ally seeking a rapprochement with Pyongyang.
2. Tokyo is fearful of the US cutting a deal with Pyongyang to dismantle its long-range intercontinental ballistic missiles (with strike capability against the US mainland) while leaving its short and medium range missiles (with strike capability against Japan) intact during a long "phased and synchronised" period of "denuclearisation".
3. Defence Minister Onodera Itsunori reiterated Tokyo's position of "maximum pressure" to compel Pyongyang to denuclearise at the Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore on 2 June 2018. However, US President Donald Trump abandoned the term and approach of "maximum pressure" after he met North Korean envoy Kim Yong Chol in Washington DC.
4. Trump's summit with North Korean supreme leader Kim Jong-un in Singapore was deeply troubling to the Abe administration. Trump had proposed after the Singapore Summit that Japan will pay for the economic reconstruction of North Korea even before any clarification was made on CVID (complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement) of the North's nuclear weapons or the abduction issue.
5. The Abe administration is equally troubled by the proposal to relax international sanctions against North Korea before CVID takes place. If implemented, it will place Tokyo's tough sanctions regime against Pyongyang in shambles, underscoring the fact that Japan has absolutely no leverage over the North.
6. Trump's unilateral and snap decision at the Singapore Summit to suspend US-South Korean war games to avoid "provoking" the North and to possibly withdraw US troops in South Korea in the future have profound implications for Tokyo's security.

7. The withdrawal of US troops will result in the loss of an American buffer for Japan, leaving it as the frontline state in East Asia against the backdrop of a rising and more assertive China, and two unfriendly Koreas (which may reunify in the long run) with residual nuclear capability.
8. Nevertheless, the Abe administration is pragmatically exploring a summit between Abe and Kim to resolve the abductee issue possibly in Russia's Vladivostok on the sidelines of the Eastern Economic Forum in September 2018.
9. The Trump-Kim Summit in Singapore may well be a turning point for Tokyo's relations with Pyongyang. Despite the bluster of the Abe administration to get tough on its northern neighbour, Tokyo's relations with Pyongyang may turn out to be quite prosaic: basically following the US leader. Simply put, Japan will talk to North Korea now that the United States had already done so.