

An Analysis of Changes in the US-Northeast Asian Alliance after the Trump-Kim Meeting

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Abstract

After the Trump-Kim meeting, every country is likely to adjust its diplomatic policy with the reformation of the strategic structure in Northeast Asia. For instance, military pressure has eased in South Korea, the threat of a “Decapitation Strike” by the US army has been removed from North Korea and Kim has asked for support from China, which allows Northeast Asia to enter a new international framework and makes confrontation in the economy and over trade between the US and China become a focus, with the appearance of a new US Indo-Pacific strategy. As of now, a second Trump-Kim meeting is being prepared, but given Trump’s “America First” policy, what will happen to the US army in South Korea and to the THAAD? How will the US-Japan Alliance be influenced? Will a summit meeting be held between Japan and North Korea? How will relations between Japan and North Korea be transformed? These are the questions we should pay more attention to.

Keyword: Trump-Kim Meeting, Northeast Asia, US-ROK Alliance, US-Japan Alliance, Japan-North Korea Relation

I. Introduction

The Korean Peninsula, located in the center of Northeast Asia, allows Japan and Korea to not only have a strong economic bond but also to build a national security connection. For Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula is the most significant element that decides Taiwan's destiny as well; for example, Taiwan became a part of Japanese territory after the first China-Japanese War in 1894-95, then, during the Korean War 1950-53, Taiwan was joined to the Western Bloc which prevented it being dominated by Communists. All these historical events indicate that whatever happens on the Korean Peninsula has a great impact on Taiwan and Japan. Therefore, peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and the relationship between North and South Korea are considered as influencing security and development in Northeast Asia, and the stability of the whole Asia-Pacific area.

In its modernization plan for Chinese navy, the Chinese government expects to prevent US carrier-based aircraft approaching maritime areas from beyond the first chain of islands, 1,500 km from Mainland China, by relying on the superiority of its air force and the deployment of over 40 naval craft equipped with missiles. Most military experts consider this plan is basically similar to the long-term strategy of Liu Huaqing (Commander 1982-8).¹ Within the modernization plan, surface warships and submarines with cruise missiles or ballistic missiles increase Chinese minacity in Northeast Asia. Sovremennyy-class destroyers with SS-N-22 and submarines with

1. Liu Huaqing served as Commander of the PLA Navy from 1982 through 1988, and is considered to have greatly contributed to the modernization of the Chinese Navy. 〈劉華清同志生平〉,《人民網》, January 25, 2011, <<http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1026/13806314.html>>.

SS-N-27B (Klub) or SS-N-27 (Sizzler) have become a real danger for the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force and the US Navy. Moreover, the development of an anti-ship ballistic missile in China, known as a “Carrier Killer,” triggers a nerve for the US army in the Pacific area.

As a whole, all these abilities are called “Anti-Access/Area Denial capability, A2/AD.” Once China can make good use of them, the balance of major powers in the East and West Pacific will be much changed. More particularly, the US government will face a situation in which weapon-delivery capability from its own shores is obviously restricted. For example, during the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1996, when the Chinese government carried out missile maneuvers as a provocative action, the Clinton government immediately sent out a carrier battle group to deter China. However, we might ask if the same thing were to happen today, whether the US government permit a deployment to the Taiwan Strait without any hesitation as it did 22 years ago? Unfortunately, the answer is negative, for the A2/AD capability held by China allows it to prevent a US Marine Expeditionary Unit approaching by air, sea or along the sea floor. There is a great possibility that Japan, Korea, Taiwan and the Philippines may be swallowed into a Chinese-controlled area if Chinese A2/AD breaks through the first chain of islands and allows Chinese aircraft carriers to get beyond the second chain of islands. This would be the worst case for the US government and other members of its alliance. Nevertheless, this is the essence of the strategy for a major marine power that General Liu Huaqing pursued in the 1980s.²

2. Michael McDevitt, “Ruminations about how little we know about the PLA Navy: The PLA Navy – why should we care and how come the PLA doesn’t?” October 10, 2000, *Wayback Machine*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20090702161409/http://www.ndu.edu/inss/China_Center/CMA_Conf_Oct00/paper14.htm>.

During these years, a series of nuclear weapon experiments implemented by the ruler of North Korea, Kim Jong-un, has raised tension in Northeast Asia. As a result, North Korea has been subject to a most serious embargo and sanctions from the international community. This even triggered Trump's decision to deploy aircraft carriers around the peninsula. Nonetheless, North Korea still obtained a bargaining chip by searching for benefits from the game among major powers. Kim Jong-un, who is good at playing a "rational game of irrationality," found a breach by which he could reverse the disastrous situation of his country in one moment. North Korea has promoted its status in global affairs, allowing it to earn profits and hedge between China and the US. Now it depends on the United Nations General Assembly to see whether North Korea may be given an opportunity to develop a planned economy by cancelling economic sanctions, thus making a bright future possible in Northeast Asia.

After the Trump-Kim meeting, every country is likely to adjust its diplomatic policy with the reformation of the strategic structure in Northeast Asia. For instance, military pressure has eased in South Korea, the threat of a "Decapitation Strike" by the US army has been removed from North Korea and Kim has asked for support from China, which allows Northeast Asia to enter a new international framework and makes confrontation in the economy and over trade between the US and China become a focus, with the appearance of a new US Indo-Pacific strategy. As of now, a second Trump-Kim meeting is being prepared, but given Trump's "American First" policy, what will happen to the US army in South Korea and to the THAAD? How will the US-Japan Alliance be influenced? Will a summit meeting be held between Japan and North Korea? How will relations between Japan and North Korea be transformed? These are the questions we should pay more attention to.

II. Development of the US-ROK Alliance

Washington and Seoul have a security alliance. Since the Korean War broke out in the 1950, the US has started to station troops in South Korea.³ The number of American soldiers, which was 6,000 at the end of the 1950s, has been 28,500 in recent years.

Since 1970, the US and South Korea have been cooperating in three military maneuvers: “Key Resolve,” “Foal Eagle” and “Ulchi-Freedom Guardian,” and carrying out periodic military training in each of the three maneuvers with the army and the marines. Being irritated by constant joint military maneuvers, North Korea tends to raise tension within the area by undertaking counterattack operations to ask for cancellation of the exercises. This phenomenon is also observable in the intention of the North Korean government in calling off the Trump-Kim meeting this May. Hence, US-ROK joint military maneuvers are an important sign of the situation on the Korean Peninsula.

After the remarkable Trump-Kim meeting was over, the US and North Korea reached consensus on denuclearization by signing four agreements. However, the statement that Trump wants to stop military maneuvers with the ROK permanently and even plans to withdraw the US army from the ROK at anytime actually shocked both ROK and US military officials. As North Korea never abandoned experiments for nuclear weapons after the negotiation of denuclearization in 1991,

3. Korean historian, Charles K. Armstrong, pointed out that both the United States and South Korea believed that South Korea was too weak to defend itself, and North Korea was relatively more powerful in the military. Charles K. Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), p. 26.

the US government believes that keeping military maneuvers is the best way to deter threats from North Korea. Hence, Trump's statement triggered astonishment among the public.⁴

After that, the United States Secretary of Defense, Jim Mattis, United States Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joseph Dunford, and the National Security Advisor, John Bolton, discussed how to carry on after the conclusion of the Trump-Kim meeting. They decided to arrange that the U.S. Department of Defense would make a declaration, with acceptance from ROK, that the military maneuvers would be canceled, including the "Ulchi-Freedom Guardian" in August and two other military exercises in the following three months.⁵

Yet, when the presidential routine report was submitted to the council in late June, the White House not only mentioned that economic sanctions on North Korea would be continued but also reaffirmed that there was a risk of an increase of nuclear weapons on the peninsula, and abnormal threats to US security, diplomacy and the economy caused by the conduct and policy of North Korea.⁶

Moreover, when Mattis visited South Korea at the end of June, he published a joint declaration with the South Korean Minister of

4. Robert Collins, "A Brief History of the US-ROK Combined Military Exercises," February 26, 2014, *38 North*, <<https://www.38north.org/2014/02/rcollins022714/>>.

5. Justin McCurry, "Pentagon cancels Freedom Guardian military drill with South Korea," *The Guardian*, June 19, 2018, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/19/pentagon-cancels-freedom-guardian-military-drill-with-south-korea>>.

6. Farnaz Fassihi, "U.S. Says Russia Is Hiding North Korea Sanctions Violations," *Wall Street Journal*, September 17, 2018, <http://gasp.mobile-nigeria.com/articles/u-s-says-russia-is-hiding-north-korea-sanctions-violations-1537199601?mod=article_inline>.

National Defense, Song Young-moo, saying that both countries were willing to renounce part of the maneuvers and increase credibility to ease military tension on the peninsula, but that the US government never promised to end diplomatic and military support to the ROK to confirm its security.⁷

Although the maneuvers were cancelled this June, the Pentagon still announced that the US government would continue to improve “Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD)” in the ROK. This covers a range from 200 km to 800 km and is able to reach northern China.⁸ A senior research officer of the Sejong Institute indicated that THAAD in fact conforms to the strategy of the US to restrain China’s expansion rather than seeking to improve the security of ROK. Thus, from this point of view, there is no reason for the US to withdraw THAAD from ROK.⁹

On the other hand, the South Korean Ministry of National Defense was also nervous owing to Trump’s statement about a US withdrawal. For the past seventy years, the US has always been the closest ally

7. “Mattis assures South Korea on US troops, says commitment ‘ironclad,’” *CNBC*, June 28, 2018, <<https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/28/mattisassures-south-korea-on-us-troops-says-commitment-ironclad.html>>.

8. This is because the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has developed a new version of the DF-17 hypersonic missile, which was tested in 2017. Ankit Panda, “Introducing the DF-17: China’s Newly Tested Ballistic Missile Armed With a Hypersonic Glide Vehicle,” *The Diplomat*, December 28, 2017, <<https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/introducing-the-df-17-chinas-newly-tested-ballistic-missile-armed-with-a-hypersonic-glide-vehicle/>>.

9. Minnie Chan & Lee Jeong-ho, “US targets Chinese and Russian missiles with THAAD upgrade in South Korea: military analysts,” *South China Morning Post*, July 17, 2018, <<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2155701/us-targets-chinese-and-russian-missiles-thaad-upgrade>>.

of South Korea. Not only did they conduct coordinated operations on the Korean Peninsula, in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq but they also helped boost the South Korean economy under US protection. As negotiations over denuclearization intensify, some military experts consider that there is a great possibility for the US to reduce the number of troops or withdraw the army from the peninsula to keep the regime stable in North Korea. Whatsoever the case, even if Trump seeks to recall his army, it will not happen immediately.

III. Development of the US-Japan Alliance

Seen from a perspective of strategic security, the Japanese government highly approves of US President Trump paying close attention to the security and peace of the alliance and of the world. Moreover, Abe believes that he has a will as strong as Trump, and he also confirms that the prosperity and peace of the Asia-Pacific area should be based on the foundation of the US-Japan Alliance, which is an essential characteristic of the Indo-Pacific strategy.¹⁰

However, Trump's decision to cancel "extravagant" military maneuvers with South Korea shocked the National Defense Ministries of both Japan and South Korea. This led Mattis to clarify the stability of military cooperation between the US and its allies in Northeast Asia. When he visited Japan on June 29, he even mentioned the Japanese hostages in North Korea several times showing respect for the Japanese government. Recently, there have been fifty thousand US military personnel staying in Japan, including the largest number

10. 賴怡忠,〈美國發動印太經濟戰略〉, August 6, 2018,《思想坦克》, <<https://www.voicetank.org/single-post/2018/08/06/%E7%BE%8E%E5%9C%8B%E7%99%BC%E5%8B%95%E5%8D%B0%E5%A4%AA%E7%B6%93%E6%BF%9F%E6%88%B0%E7%95%A5>>.

of United States marines outside America and a carrier strike group.

Due to urgent security changes around Japan, involving a large expansion of Chinese military activity and high-level minacity from North Korea, the Japanese government has had to adjust its strategic goals by purchasing two land-based Aegis Systems, F-35 and P-1 aircraft, and cruise missiles. Currently, there are three main ways for the Japanese to deploy military power: first, cooperate with the deployment of US strategic weapons within Northeast Asia, including providing Iwakuni base, a US-Japan-shared base, and Guam base for stationing F-35 aircraft or deploying bombers, nuclear submarines and the second carrier strike group permanently, then holding joint military exercises in the face of practical threats; second, deploying forces and equipment to the southwestern islands, including aircraft, a renewed radar, anti-air & anti-ship missiles, and corvettes; third, enlarging its anti-ship ability to cover the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean.

Therefore, the Japanese Ministry of Defense must offer strategic ideas and a strategic structure, a list of weapons to be purchased and a financial budget for the weapons in the Midterm Report of the National Defense Review before the end of 2018 so that it can include it in the budget in 2019 and win support from the governing party.¹¹ At the same time, both the National Defense Program Guidelines for 2019 and the Medium Term Defense Program for 2019 are based on the structure of the US-Japan Alliance, which plans to reinforce the anti-missile system and establish a self-counterattack ability to resist cruise missiles, long-distance attacks, cyber assaults and spy satellite systems from North Korea. From this point of view, the relations in

11. 郭育仁, 〈朝鮮半島危機與日本戰略操作〉, May 2017, pp. 1-8, 《臺北論壇》, <http://140.119.184.164/view_pdf/366.pdf>.

the US-Japan Alliance should be strengthened rather than weakened, however relations between the USA and North Korea are going to develop.

On the other hand, the Chinese element cannot be ignored when analyzing US-Japan relations. How President Trump treats China will bring different challenges to US-Japan relations. If the US maintains good relations with China, Japan may fear it will be abandoned strategically. Whilst US-Japan relations could remain stable if the US adopts a negative attitude to China. The US government still considers Japan as not only an essential partner within its security strategy, but a base for military delivery, so from this point of view, Japan holds an important status within US strategy in Asia. Although there might be quarrels over which duties both countries are responsible for in US-Japan relations, Trump never denies the necessity of forming an alliance with others, so it is believed that US-Japan relations may maintain their present state for a certain period of time. In other words, although Trump might urge Japan to gradually act on its own, cooperation between the United States and Japan will not be changed in the short term.

IV. Development of Relations between Japan and North Korea

North Korea is always an important issue for the Japanese government, so the possibility of holding a conference with North Korea is regarded as a great improvement in Japanese diplomacy. As a result, the former Prime Minister of Japan, Junichiro Koizumi, visited Pyongyang as early as September 2002 when Mr. Abe was Vice Cabinet Secretary. However, despite Kim Jong-il admitting the fact that North Korea had kidnaped Japanese citizens and his release of five of them, public opinion in Japan still refused to normalize diplo-

matic relations with North Korea until the kidnap problem was solved, which led to the failure of the efforts made by the Koizumi government. Realizing the resistance from its citizens, Japan confirmed that seeking a solution to the kidnap problem should be a priority in Japanese diplomatic policy rather than establishing diplomatic relations with North Korea.

Nowadays, even though it seems hard to reverse the negative relations between Japan and North Korea, it is actually a phase when each side may convey its good intentions to the other. Kim Jong-un has complained to Japan that the problem of Japanese citizens kidnapped by North Korean agents is an issue that should be discussed in a meeting and has criticized Japan for utilizing it as a tool to prevent the Korean Peninsula from heading towards a peaceful stage. Yet, after the President of South Korea, Moon Jae-in, transferred a message saying that the Japanese government is willing to hold talks and normalize diplomatic relations with the DPRK based on liquidation of historical events, Kim demonstrated his willingness to interact with Japan as well.¹² Thus, it is not difficult to say that a Japan-DPRK summit will probably be held once the time is ripe.

Hence, there might be a possibility that the Japanese government will ask for a direct meeting again with North Korea to discuss the situation and repatriation of Japanese hostages before building diplomatic relations and offering financial support. Yet, dealing with the kidnap problem is not actually a simple mission. Even though previous interaction between the two countries might motivate Abe and Kim to meet face to face, postponement of the meeting is always the result

12. ANN NEWS, 〈正恩氏、日朝対話に意欲 文大統領が安倍総理に報告〉, April 29, 2018, 《Youtube》, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPKKOBAAdL0>>.

of there being no consensus. But however long they postpone it, an Abe-Kim meeting might be gradually arranged in 2019.

However, even though relations between the US and the DPRK have recently changed dramatically, there are still reasons why it remains very difficult for Japan and the DPRK to normalize diplomatic relations. First, to realize diplomatic relations, both Japan and the DPRK must agree on an apology and compensation for WWII and the colonial period, which may prove costly. Second, it is actually hard to solve the problem of the kidnapped before diplomatic relations are normalized. Third, the normalization of diplomatic relations with the DPRK will structurally alter Japan's strategy in Northeast Asia, including its diplomatic and security policies toward China and Russia. Finally, if normalization of Japan-DPRK diplomatic relations is realized before US-DPRK normalization, it might irritate the government not only of the US but also of South Korea.

V. Conclusion: The Development of Northeast Asia

However the state of affairs is going to develop on the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan will play a more critical role within Northeast Asia. If, on the one hand, the situation tends to ease on the peninsula, confrontation between the US and China would transfer to the South China Sea and the first island chain. On the other hand, if the situation becomes more serious, there would be a great possibility for Taiwan to get involved in the conflict. Given such ambiguous competition among major powers on the peninsula, it will take time to observe how the Taiwanese government considers its own national security and stable development in the Asia-Pacific area.

In addition, the long-term military goal of China is to win command of the western Pacific from the US by taking Taiwan as its

center and extending its military power over the first island chain, consisting of the Ryuku Islands and the Philippine Islands. It is not difficult to predict that the Chinese government is eager to establish its hegemony from the western Pacific to the Indian Ocean, which will force the US government to reconsider if its security and military strategy should be based on the defense of Taiwan. By abandoning assistance to a highly democratized country like Taiwan, the US will lose credibility among East Asian countries headed by Japan, which depends on American security to resist Chinese power, and the foundation of the US security structure might ultimately be undermined.

Whatever the case it is necessary for us to reconsider the importance of the security that the US has promised when we try to comprehend the international structure in the region. However, we would be too optimistic if we thought that the participation of the US will be permanent. Assigning regional security to the US is the basis of an Indo-Pacific security system that is centered on US military power. The existence of US military in East Asia and the Western Pacific is not only a guarantee of peace and safety for Japan, the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea but also for the Indian Ocean region, it is also indispensable internationally.

Unfortunately, Taiwan and democratic countries in the region cut formal diplomatic relations in the 1970s, but all still make an effort together to maintain and reinforce this public property in the western Pacific and Indian Ocean region, based on their common values and benefits.

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