



# IDSS COMMENTARIES (09/2003)

*IDSS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of IDSS.*

---

## TENSION ON KOREAN PENINSULA: JAPAN MOST THREATENED

Bhubhindar Singh\*

26 March 2003

The East Asian security environment has become more perilous. Though overshadowed by the on-going war in Iraq the rising tension on the Korean Peninsula following North Korea's declared intention to resume its nuclear programme has raised the danger level by several notches. For the first time, North Korea has admitted to having an active nuclear weapons programme and even 'more powerful weapons'. Pyongyang's admission came as a shock to the international community, especially the US, Japan and South Korea.

For Japan the threat posed by the Pyongyang regime would require more immediate attention than deposing the Saddam Hussein regime. Of the many reasons for this observation four stand out: First, Pyongyang's nuclear programme is no longer a suspicion. Although this provocative act goes against international standards of behaviour, it appears that Pyongyang is determined to equip itself with nuclear weapons at any cost. This act raises tension in the Korean Peninsula, and in turn, affects Japan's national security.

Second, Japan and North Korea have several unresolved bilateral issues and Japan's national security has been repeatedly threatened by North Korea. The North Korean nuclear boast came not long after Pyongyang's admission of the role it played in abducting 13 Japanese nationals in the 1970s and 1980s (an admission made during Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visit to Pyongyang in September 2002.) Tokyo's national security has been threatened by Pyongyang's suspected missile launch over Japan on 31 August 1998 and repeated covert incursions by North Korean vessels into Japanese waters.

Third, Japan's geographical proximity to North Korea makes the threat even more real for all Japanese citizens. With parts of Japan just 500 km away from North Korean territory, Japanese officials have said that Pyongyang's missiles are able to strike Japan in 10 minutes. The seriousness of this is compounded by Japan's lack of effective means of protecting its citizens from such attacks. This point was asserted by Japan's Defence Agency chief Shigeru Ishiba when he said, "All we could do is to minimize the damage if a missile is fired against Japan." The recent short-range missile tests by North Korea made the already tense Japanese more nervous.

Fourth, among all the countries around North Korea, Japan has the worst relations with it. China and North Korea have a formal alliance and their closeness has been mutually described as akin to "lips and teeth". Despite some strains in the bilateral relationship China has been a long-standing ally and has better relations with the North Korean regime than any

other country.

Although South and North Korea are politically estranged and territorially divided, they both accept the view that they are one. They share ethnic unity and a long history as one political entity, divided by external forces. Despite official pronouncements that identify North Korea as the primary threat to national security, South Korea has continually adopted the policy of negotiation and engagement in dealing with the North.

South Korea knows that any war on North Korea would rebound on itself. North Korea has a vested interest in not striking the modern industrial part of Korea that lies in the South.

Japan, however, suffers a double jeopardy from being the closest ally of the United States in Asia and the despised former occupying power of Korea, which make the relationship with North Korea most strained and fraught with danger.

The gravity of the threat posed by North Korea to Japan is reflected in three recent developments in Japan. First, senior officials in Japan are already talking about “pre-emptive strike”. Defence Agency chief Ishiba said “Our nation will use military force as a self-defence measure if they start to resort to arms against Japan.” The emergence of such statements in the security discourse of Japan is significant as such talk has been regarded as taboo in pacifist Japan for a long time.

Second, the Japanese government announced plans to launch its first spy satellites, two on March 28 and another two probably by the middle of the year. Japan’s decision to launch spy satellites was stimulated by the launch of a North Korean ballistic missile over Japan’s main island into the Pacific in 1998. North Korea’s recent provocative behaviour could have lent urgency to Japan’s desire to possess the capability to detect missile launches. The satellites provide Japan with surveillance and intelligence gathering capabilities, primarily of areas surrounding Japan. This is a significant shift because Japan has relied on the United States for intelligence information on regional security since the end of World War Two. Japan’s decision to launch the satellites signals the desire of Japan to take a more proactive role in providing for its own security.

Third, the nuclear and missile threats from North Korea have probably pushed Japan to seek further development in the theatre-missile defence (TMD) system in cooperation with the United States. Since North Korea’s admission of possessing an active nuclear programme, Defence Agency chief Ishiba has repeatedly proposed that the system be moved from the research phase into the development phase. Having a TMD system would allow Japan to track and shoot down incoming ballistic missiles.

The above actions have two implications. First, the recent escalation of the North Korean threat seems to have changed the security discourse in Japan. It signals a greater military role for the Self-Defence Force (SDF) in regional security matters both during peace time and crises.. Second, Japanese authorities are taking national security matters more into their own hands. Although there is and will be much reliance on the United States for security, there seem to be a greater cognizance on the part of the Japanese to provide for their own security. The launching of the spy satellites and the talk of “pre-emptive strikes” reflect this reality.

The current war in Iraq further fuels Japan’s insecurity in the context of the Korean crisis. President Bush’s undivided attention to removing Saddam Hussein’s regime does not allow the United States to address the North Korean nuclear threat the way Japan and other East

Asian countries would have preferred. Also, the high costs and demands of the Iraq war on the US military may not permit the United States to immediately redirect its attention to the Korean crisis following the conclusion of the Iraq war. On the other hand, the North Korean regime has claimed that the United States may spark a 'second Iraqi crisis' by attacking Pyongyang. As a result North Korea's state-run *Minju Joson* newspaper said that North Korea will "increase its national defense power on its own without the slightest vacillation no matter what others may say,"

Japan would want to seek a peaceful resolution to the North Korean issue and resume normalization talks. At present, lack of progress in breaking stalemate over the Pyongyang nuclear issue is a result of conflicting demands between United States and North Korea. While the United States insists that Pyongyang first end its nuclear programme before it will agree to multilateral talks (including Japan and South Korea) that could lead to economic and energy assistance, North Korea prefers a bilateral dialogue with United States. However, this crisis could be an opportunity to Japanese policymakers too. Being arguably the most threatened state among North Korea's neighbours and the closest ally of the United States, this crisis provides Tokyo an opportunity to assert its leadership by working with both Washington and Pyongyang to seek a peaceful diplomatic solution to ensure a nuclear weapons-free Korean Peninsula. The alternative though remote possibility of having a nuclearised Korea, without the presence of US forces on the peninsula, is one that might be unthinkable for Japan to contemplate.

*(Bhubhinder Singh is an Associate Research Fellow at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Singapore)*