

Security Dilemma in Northeast Asia: A Case Study of North Korea

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Abstract

In Northeast Asia, the security threat, particularly in connection with North Korea, is a significant threat to the global and regional peace. The actions of North Korea and its activities, such as the creation of nuclear weapons and military aggression have increased the tensions between North and South Korea as well as between the United States, China, and Russia. This article aims at analysing factors that relate to security dilemmas within the region, especially the military posture of North Korea. Based on the collected material, this article investigates the main actors' reactions—the regional powers and the international community—and explores the processes that led to increasing tensions and the identified security issues; the paper also assesses the possible ways of addressing these threats. Stabilization and long-term peace require political dialogue, mutual trust with ambassadors' reciprocal visits, membership in collective security systems, non-proliferation and arms limitation, and cooperation in economic matters. However, a variety of actors in the regional and international system are required to manage the threats of conflict and achieve stability in Northeast Asia. This qualitative research contributes to the existing literature on security problems and helps to discover ways of addressing regional conflicts based on cooperation and diplomacy.

1. Introduction

The sub-region of Northeast Asia with the geographical coverage that includes the Korean peninsula; China; Japan; and Russia, is said to play centre stage in world politics due to a mix of; political and both economic and strategic characteristics of the area. The main country that lies at the heart of this area is North Korea, or the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), a monochrome state coloured by the unpredictability of its government, secretive isolation, and military-first orientation. After the Korea-Armistice Agreement signed in 1953, the DPRK has been following a very provocative, military dominated, nuclear capable, and missile technology driven policy. North Korea's persistent development and testing of nuclear-powered weapons have created enduring security concerns that impact not only South Korea and Japan but also extend to the United States and other regional actors (Oh, 2024). As such, North Korea's actions are often perceived as a significant destabilizing factor in Northeast Asia, which complicates attempts to establish long-term peace and stability.

North Korean nuclear and missile initiatives have been termed as one of the primary origins of instability in this region. Nuclear program in DPRK is a program that started in the mid-20th century and has grown tremendously over the last few decades against international non-proliferation standards. Nevertheless, North Korea has been able to use several nuclear explosives to this day and it

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is actively building a strong arsenal of ballistic missiles that can strike large portions of East Asia and even further due to multiple UN sanctions and widespread international condemnation (Dalton, Michishita, & Zhao, 2018). This development undermines international non-proliferation and increases the security threat in Northeast Asia causing deterioration to a faulty security situation characterized by military build-ups and diplomatic strains.

The reasons of North Korea to pursue nukes are complex. On the inside, the nuclear weapons are perceived to guarantee the continuity of the regime by preventing any perceived external aggression, especially that of the United States, which is massively deployed in the United States of Japan South Korea (Bechtol, 2017). North Korea has been utilizing its nuclear program as a bargaining chip, internationally, where it has sought to gain economic support and compromises as long as it is able to retain a bargaining power at the international level. The acquisition of nuclear arms has therefore assumed a fundamental part of the DPRK foreign policy that shapes its relations with its neighbours and the structure of security in the area.

This is further aggravated by the constant missile tests and military provocations by the DPRK thus creating instability in the region. Over the last few years, North Korea has been launching more missiles and most of them are done in such a way that they coincided with United States, South Korea, and Japan combined military drills (Lee & Botto, 2020). Such provocative moves cause panic in other neighbouring states, and the responses of these states are increased military vigilance and a fast reaction to the changes in the military defence strategy. An example is Japan and South Korea which have acted in response by enhancing their military capacities and strengthening their security ties with the United States especially. Consequently, the provocations of North Korea have led to an arms race in the region, creating a complicated security dilemma, as any state security steps are seen as a threat to the other, and the process of mutual distrust and additional militarization begins (Iqbal & Sajjad, 2023).

In addition, North Korea has dramatic posture and unpredictability, which affect the larger geopolitical orientations in the Northeast Asian region. The DPRK has caused bilateral relations between the major states such as China, Russia, the United States, and Japan to be strained and change of the focus of policies. Previously viewed as the closest ally to North Korea, China has problems with its approach to supporting the latter and preserving order in the region, avoiding the growth of its influence (Swanstrom, 2024). The US has expanded its security commitments in relation to its allies to strengthen the US-South Korea association and US-Japan affiliations but goes on to detail the possible interpretations of diplomacy association with China and Russia. These regional dynamics shed light on the retaliatory implications of North Korean actions outside of East Asia and to a greater extent, the Korean Peninsula and how the actions of the DPRK have a spillover effect on the security structure of the whole of Northeast Asia.

This article is aimed at providing a broad understanding of North Korea and its contribution to insecurity within the Northeast Asian region. It will investigate the origin of nuclear and missile programs in North Korea and other factors that led to military buildup and consequences of its policies on its neighbours and the world. In addition, the study has discussed the implications of North Korea's actions on other relations, policies, and diplomacy of the countries in Northeast Asia, with a focus on the security dilemma that is characteristic to the region because of provocative actions by North Korea. The goal of offered research is to bring new insights to the analysis of the multifaceted military, political, and diplomatic security system of Northeast Asia and contribute to the explanation of factors that might determine the prospects of peace in one of the most sensitive and crucial zones in the world.

2. Literature Review

In the article *Russia-DPRK relations: Strategic partnership or opportunistic alliance?* by DePetris in 38 North (2024), the author focuses on the Russian economic and political cooperation with North

Korea and the impact on the respective region's stability. As he asserts, Moscow considers its partnership with North Korea as the means of maintaining a balance of power with the United States in the Northeast Asian region and providing the North with food and diplomatic support that it needed to sustain itself in the international arena (DePetris, 2024). The article shows that Russia's participation allows the provision of necessary assistance to North Korea, thereby complicating the work with sanctions and challenging the goal of strengthening international security. However, the study leaves a gap in exploring the potential effects of a more cooperative or hardline Russian approach on regional stability and North Korea's strategic calculations.

The paper *Economic sanctions during humanitarian emergencies* by Haggard and Noland in *East-West Centre* (2023) aims to review and critically weigh the success of economic sanctions against North Korea with emphasis on North Korea and regional economies implications. They describe how the UN and US implementation of sanctions has limited Pyongyang's connections to international financial systems and essential resources yet failed to let the country surrender its nuclear weapons. Looking at some of these negative impacts, Haggard and Noland revealed that sanctions created an economic burden on other nations that have business relations with North Korea in addition to a boost to the black market. They also underscore how sanctions have made North Korea's dependence on China even deeper (Haggard, 2023). But they do not explore differential diplomatic strategies, therefore lacking information about how the positive economic incentives may change the behaviour of North Korea.

The paper *South Korea: Siding with the West and distancing from Russia* by Pardo and Kim in *International Politics* (2023) focuses on the fact how the South Korea has adapted its defence tactics due to the moves from the North Korea, including missile tests and nuclear development. They also talk about South Korea's heavy spending on defence systems like THAAD and further explain how such measures put South Korea in sync with the US security goals. The authors also tackle South Korea's intention to build up pre-emptive strikes, a new shift in outlook for self-defence (Pardo, 2023). This strategy, they state, has strengthened the second-party's deterrence capabilities, but at the same time has created a multiplier effect that leads to the growth of military reaction in the second-party system—the DPRK. From this viewpoint, moreover, the study fails to show how this posture might affect South Korea's relationship with other actors in the region, including China and Japan, or how it might alter the overall system of security in the region.

The article *How regional organization survives: ASEAN, hedging and international society* by Wicaksana and Karim in *Contemporary Politics* (2023) explains ASEAN's diplomatic third-party position in the Northeast Asian security architecture and how it use this position to foster dialogue between North Korea with other countries in the region. They also talk about the ASEAN course, which embraces multilateral communication and collective security and could help to reduce tensions with North Korea. ASEAN Track II diplomacy forums, including the ARF, provide sparse chances for North Korean diplomats to interact with counterparts from South Korea, Japan, China, and the US. According to authors, ASEAN get a free ride unlike other organizations but points out that it has no power to punish (Wicaksana, 2023). According to the work done, ASEAN activities could scale up if backed sufficiently by the regional actors, but the research does not delve into the specific structures that could endow ASEAN with more of a peace-building mission in Northeast Asia.

The article *North Korea's advanced nuclear weapons and US extended deterrence for South Korea: An assessment based on nuclear deterrence theory* by Choi in *Journal of the Asia-Japan Research Institute of Ritsumeikan University* (2021) gives a balanced review of the image of allies, South Korea and the United States, who discuss the threats the former faces, and at the same time, the destabilizers that can aggravate the situation. He posits that it acted in the past as a balancer, comforting South Korea when North Korean actions were worrisome. Yet Choi note that North Korea views this cooperation as a threat, which is why the DPRK develops nuclear programs and missile technology as ways to preserve the regime. The researcher discusses the American involvement in conducting military rehearsals with South Korea, which the latter interprets as actual preparations for an invasion—thus increasing the tension (Choi, 2021). This is striking, given that, as the study under

discussion demonstrates, the alliance helps to contain North Korea yet in the meantime fosters insecurity. However, there is no discussion in article how confidence building measures and tension releasing can be stimulated in the context of the alliance, non-military.

3. Research Question

How has North Korea's security strategy contributed to the security dilemma in Northeast Asia, and what are its implications for regional peace and stability?

4. Research Methodology

The present study adopted a qualitative method of inquiry in the effort to determine how North Korea affected security policy issues related to Northeast Asia. Because of the nature of geopolitical relations and the sensibility of nuclear topics, qualitative methods are particularly well suited to uncover those less explicit dimensions around the state interaction, strategic intentions and actors' views. The methodology of this research rested on two main pillars, data collection and analysis.

4.1 Data Collection

The research used secondary sources as the major source of data such as peer-reviewed journals, government policies documents, official reports, and credible news outlets on North Korea, nuclear developments, ballistic missile launchings, and security in the region. This study therefore explored strategies of North Korea and their effects on stability in the Northeast Asian region. It has examined the way in which the regional states have been managing themselves and examines the general regional implications of these interactions. The study commissioned the official pronouncements and speeches of the government heads, officials and conducted detailed reports of global institutions to know the policy position and stance of the most affected. These were the sources that reported on different trends which influence security in Northeast Asia. Data has been collected from Books, articles, reports for analysis.

4.2 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to comprehend and classify patterns of data gathered in this research. These trends exposed the character and the level of nuclear armaments desired by North Korea, the security measures of states within its region, diplomatic developments, and diplomatic endeavours to connect with this country. The gathered information was synthesized by stimulating and placing it under specific categories as an explanation of how the military of North Korea assumed a stance that posed a risk to the security of the region. The case studies presented give factual experiences of actions by the North Korea, and they can be used to illustrate the acute effects, as well as the more chronic effects of the actions of the North Korea on the security in the northeast of Asia. Advantages of the move was to provide a broad perspective of the role the North Koreans played in causing the insecurity in the region, assist in acquiring information that can be valuable in the subsequent formulations of the approaches and policies to improve security and viable diplomacy in the region.

5. North Korea's Military Posturing and Its Impact on Regional Security

Nuclear accumulation and general military aggression of North Korea has been one of the major factors that have contributed to the ongoing security crisis in Northeast Asia. The numerous causes of domestic politics and foreign policy dictate the necessity of the country to assume a militant military stance manifested in the creation and training of nuclear and missile or in conventional armies. This is not only risky behaviour with the regional neighbours such as South and South Korea and Japan but also has invited the major powers states such as the United States, China, and Russia. North Korean leadership (especially Kim Jong-un) considers that the nuclear weapons serve as the ultimate provider of security of regimes to its leaders in an international system that they see as hostile to them. The

impact of the Korean War (1950-1953) where North Korea was destroyed by the U.S. and South Korean forces is still evident in the defence strategy of the country. With military preparedness and self-reliance, which were centralized in the state ideology of Juche, North Koreans have been focusing on military preparedness since the war. The nuclear weapons program that was gaining great momentum after the 1990s was fuelled by the perceived need to have deterrence against what Pyongyang considers the existential threat of the U.S and its allies (Kim, 2023).

The result of this arms race has been to further increase the South Korean, Japanese and U.S defence expenditure. Military modernization of South Korea has not been spared since many decades ago and during the past decades; the country has been advancing its missile defence systems such as the Korean Air and Missile Defence (KAMD) and deployment of the latest system the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) system which is specifically designed to intercept missiles launched by North Koreans. South Korea has however installed THAAD, a development that has brought conflict with China, which believes that the system is a danger to its own strategic deterrence (Wang, 2024).

6. Regional Responses to North Korea's Military Actions

North Korean military activities, especially in the development of nuclear and missiles, have received different reactions across the region. Such responses are due to security considerations, history, and balance of power equations. The five important factors that are involved in the process of managing the North Korean provocations are South Korea, Japan, China, Russia, and the United States, targeting to serve their playing strategic interests in Northeast Asia. However, these responses are not only inconsistent but also varied by the different priorities and regional factors, even though they hinder the establishment of a permanent peace and security.

South Korea, being the immediate neighbour to North Korea, has the misfortune of suffering from any military aggression from North Korea. Accordingly, North Korea's buildup of military power has been meted out by South Korea's progressive spending in defence and efforts at updating its top-notch equipment. Steven Miller has written that the South Korean government considers North Korea's nuclear program as an existence threat, and its military strategy is based on the twin principles of deterrence and defensiveness. Currently, the missile defence of South Korea is improved, especially with the THAAD system, developed by the United States. THAAD is designed to intercept North Korean missiles in their terminal phase, thereby offering protection to South Korean territory and U.S. military assets in the region (BBC NEWS, 2017).

Although geographically Japan is detached to the Korean Peninsula, it has been heavily affected by military progressions of North Korea. The rise of North Korea missile and nuclear testing has made Japan rethink its posture of pacifism protection as guaranteed in Article 9 of its constitution after the World War II. The way Japan has reacted to the provocations of North Korea has been multifaceted because it had deployed military and diplomatic methods. Japan has also strengthened its missile defence systems such as Aegis Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) system which is meant to intercept the missiles launched by North Koreans. Japan has also been having joint military drills with United States and South Korea in order to enhance its regional security (O'Shea, 2024).

The China policy towards North Korea is motivated by the interest to stabilize the region and avert North Korean regime collapse, which may result into a hoard of refugees into the China northeastern provinces. Also, China fears the possibility of united Korea that would lead to a U.S.-oriented, democratic neighbouring state. As such, although China sometimes backs international sanctions it also offers North Korea important economic assistance and diplomatic assistance, particularly when tensions are high. A balancing act between preserving its relationship with North Korea and countering the risk of military development by North Korea has complicated the role of China in the crisis especially to an extent that it is contradictory (Wang, 2024).

Russia is also a major regional power that borders on North Korea, and it is like China. Although Russia does not enjoy such an economic or military weight that China possesses in North Korea, it has remained influential in terms of affecting how the region reacts to the activities of North Korea. Russia has mostly followed the same stance as China and has been in favour of U.N. sanctions, yet at the same time they have tried to seek diplomatic resolutions to the crisis. The stability of the region is the main issue that Russia is concerned about because it believes that the destabilizing impact of the provocations of North Korea might result in a more dominant U.S military presence close to its borders (Lee, 2024). During the recent years, Russia has been reinforcing diplomatic and military ties with North Korea. Russia has also provided technical support to North Korea in fields like nuclear power generation, and both states have also had joint military exercises. Another area that Russia has been averse to is the U.S. security architecture in the region especially the proliferation of THAAD in South Korea, which the country considers destabilizing. The reaction of Russia to the activities of North Korea is thus influenced by the urge to have a balance of power in the region and take the U.S. influence expansion at the cost of the strategic interests of Russia.

The U.S. has diplomatically sought bilateral and multilateral initiatives to interact with North Korea. Where the Trump administration had focused on its maximum pressure policy, which prioritized sanctions and isolation, the Biden administration has focused on a more subtle policy, in which it has placed an emphasis on diplomacy, but without conditions. The failure of the 2018-2019 summit discussions between President Trump and Kim Jong-un, however, underscored the difficulties within negotiating with a regime that perceives nuclear weapons as the key to its existence (Smith, 2023). The U.S. reaction to the activities of North Korea has been a combination of military deterrence, economic sanctions, and sporadic diplomatic overtures with the aim of denuclearizing North Korea and at the same time containing the overall security risks associated with its antics.

7. Escalation of the Security Dilemma in Northeast Asia

One of the most prominent tendencies in security relations in Northeast Asia has been the so-called security dilemma where actions of a state aimed at improving its security will lead to insecurity of other states which respond by taking countermeasures, which will only increase the initial insecurity. The hostility of the North Korean towards USA particularly and the strategic insecurity in the region at the same time has turned this region to be the epicentre of the intensification of the security dilemmas. To react to the threat of North Korea, the U.N. Security Council has already passed several resolutions which are based on a series of sanctions on the economy, military and leaders of the North Korean country. Sanctions, although they inflict profound consequences on the North Korean economy, have not contributed to the change in behaviour in Pyongyang. Also, the UN and its partners, including the United States, constantly blame China and Russia for not implementing sanctions fully, thus making multidimensional attempts to resolve the crisis fail. However, such talks have remained virtually deadlocked, and very little has been done towards denuclearization. The demise of multilateral diplomacy in addressing the North Korean issue has further underscored the problems associated with intervention in the management of the security dilemma in Northeast Asia (Iqbal & Sajjad, 2023).

8. Mitigating the Security Dilemma in Northeast Asia

The security dilemma in Northeast Asia that stems from North Korea's military developments, actions of regional actors, and roles of powers from outside the region pose a great threat to regional security. The best way to reduce the seriousness of the security dilemma is through diplomacy that continues unabated. Prior attempts at diplomacy using the Six-Party Talks have shown that the crisis cannot be solved only through dialogue in the bilateral or multilateral format. Yet, there is understandable reluctance to attempt that kind of initiative again, but the upside is that the resumption of direct multilateral talks between North Korea, South Korea, the United States, China, Japan, and Russia may offer a forum for addressing key security issues. Thus, talk for North Korea is a means of achieving its ultimate goal: the guarantees of its security. North Korea's leaders have always wanted the United

States to pull out its troops from South Korea as well as halt the joint drills with the United States (Swanstrom, 2024). However, those demands may be hard to accept. 100% dialogue could have the following effects of compromise: containment of military drills and assurance of no harm or intention of attack. But, because diplomatic dialogue provides the skeleton for a positive interaction between the states, it can stop the process of either side giving a provocation and the other providing a counter provocation, which results in the escalation of the security dilemma.

The first and one of the most important tasks in reducing exacerbation of the security dilemma is the problem of North Korean nuclear ambitions. Perhaps one cannot dream of the immediate total elimination of the nuclear threat, but a gradual approach seemed to be the solution to greater arms control. The rivals could view it that, with some promise of the other backing off, North Korea could be persuaded to desist from its nuclear and missile tests. This process was that gradual, progressive measures such as the freezing and eventual dismantling of North Korea's nuclear program or a dismantling of its arsenal could be negotiated. Also, the further development of multilateral arms control approaches, including the NPT framework applied to North Korea, can also assist in the integration of the country into the mainstream world's non-proliferation regime. Such steps should be reinforced by statements about the non-use of force against North Korea by the United States and its allies if the country adheres to the requirements of disarmament (O'Shea, 2024).

While economic engagement remains one of the critical approaches to the promotion of stability, there is the likelihood that the security dilemma will only be overcome through the adoption of a multifaceted approach. This paper argues that North Korea has been propelled to engage in militarily provocative gestures by its economic isolationism as a way of sustaining its internal political stability. Perhaps limited liberalization of the economy to encourage limited cross-border exchanges with a foreign entity of the North Korean economy's choosing could help relieve its current pressures while increasing cooperation and dependence in the region. From the 1990s, South Korea had its own "Chance Policy" example, which implies cooperation through humanitarian aid and trade as a leverage to decrease hostility levels (Kim, 2023). Although the policy is slightly divergent, we are still able to move in this direction and establish a system of economic cooperation with certain benefits and opportunities that would not appear under more ambiguous conditions, tied to problems of nuclear disarmament and security assurances. The exchange of goods, money, investment, or technology between North Korea and other countries will make any conflict least efficient and help diminish the interests of both sides on the use of force.

9. Conclusion

The security challenge in Northeast Asia, or focusing on North Korea's military actions, is one of the most profound and significant issues of the current theoretical and practical geopolitical agenda. The ongoing process of building up nuclear capability and aggressive military actions, combined with the North Korean government's aggressive actions as well as the impact of other great powers such as the United States, China, and Russia, has made the security environment of the peninsula quite unpredictable. Nevertheless, it is possible to eliminate the risk of conflict through intensified diplomacy, increased trust, collective security arrangements, and a gradual reduction of the level of arming. First of all, diplomatic relations are the only way to stop the process—a reciprocal response to an escalation. The Soviet actions of the Six Party Talks and bilateral summits prove that talking requires challenges but is necessary to consider the security interests of all sides. Due to the establishment of communication linkages between North Korea, its neighbours, and other international actors, chances of conflict resolution will be initiated. It involves strategic manoeuvrability and a basic understanding that the security of no single country should be achieved at the expense of the other. A broad and multilayered diplomatic approach could be created with the help of which its authors are able to consider North Korea's concerns about its security and, at the same time, respond to the legitimate interests of the countries in the region.

Some of the measures include periodically launching general ‘transparency’ activities, for example, when providing information of military actions ongoing in a certain state, and the development of ‘hot lines’ for direct communications. Although such measures may prevent conflicts from arising or cool down the hostile relations that have already developed between states, they do not address the security questions at their root; nevertheless, they can build confidence between the parties, which may help to establish the conditions for more fundamental talks. Trust was identified here as a way of achieving confidence-building that could also pave the way for further comprehensive security pacts and, thus overall, ‘dialling down’ on the elements of mistrust in the region. Unlike the security dilemma, which is still a fact in Northeast Asia, it is not an insurmountable problem. Through the spectrum of diplomacy, mutual reassurances and commitments, collective security arrangements, a program of disarmament and arms control, and economic cooperation, there is a potential course for the more effective assurance of a more stable regional environment. It is the responsibility of everyone to accept the concept that long peace and security in the region can only be achieved when the people of Northeast Asia come together to promote long-term security.

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