

AJISS-Commentary

The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies

IIPS

Institute for International
Policy Studies

JIIA

The Japan Institute of
International Affairs

RIPS

Research Institute for
Peace and Security

Editor:

Akio Watanabe

Editorial Board:

Masashi Nishihara
Naoko Saiki
Taizo Yakushiji

Online Publisher:

Yoshiji Nogami
President, JIIA

No.111. 3 March 2011

CHALLENGES IN DEALING WITH NORTH KOREA

Shunji Hiraiwa

A series of events surrounding North Korea in 2010 – ranging from the sinking of the ROK Navy ship *Cheonan*, the ascension of Kim Jong-Un as successor to leader Kim Jong Il and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island – drew the world's attention. All these can be understood as moves toward the country's declared national goal of "opening the door to a strong and prosperous nation" in 2012. Japan, the United States and South Korea have responded to each of Pyongyang's provocations, and these events have revealed mid- and long-term challenges the international community faces in dealing with North Korea.

The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.

Of the three pillars of the goal – ideology, the military and the economy – the succession marks a development on the ideological front intended for regime stability. On the military front, Pyongyang conducted a series of missile launches and nuclear tests two years ago and demonstrated its conventional military capabilities by sinking the *Cheonan* and bombarding Yeonpyeong Island last year. The most challenging front is the economy, and Pyongyang has to rely on China for this part. In order to reduce its relative dependency on China, Pyongyang may want to obtain the broadest possible cooperation from the international community by opening a negotiation channel with Washington. The shift in Pyongyang's policy toward Washington in the direction of seeking dialogue after the Yeonpyeong shelling attests to this.


The first lesson is that, although the outline of the North's next regime is becoming clear with the official debut of Kim Jong-Un, as long as his leadership is based on a military-first policy (Songun), we cannot expect a major change to occur from within for the time being. Of course there is always a potential for political change and we cannot dismiss the possibility. However, the military-backed regime of North Korea, whose people have no idea about democracy, appears to be on more firm footing than we would expect. We need to be prepared to deal with the regime over the medium and long term.

Secondly, we need to look squarely at China's influence in the problem of North Korea. That the current Pyongyang regime cannot sustain itself without Beijing's backing means the international community cannot solve the problem without Chinese cooperation. However, Beijing does not always stand with Tokyo, Washington and Seoul in coping with North Korean provocations. The Chinese attitude toward Pyongyang's nuclear tests and missile launches, the *Cheonan* sinking and the Yeonpyeong attack attest to this. We need to consider how to get China to cooperate with the three countries.

Meanwhile the US will continue to play a leading role in addressing issues surrounding North Korea. Pyongyang is demanding negotiation of a separate peace treaty with Washington to replace the Korean War Armistice Agreement. It says arming itself with nuclear weapons is an effort to counter threats from the United States. The shelling of Yeonpyeong Island and the

subsequent steps taken by North Korea suggest that many of the country's moves are directed at the US. Washington's basic stance is to coordinate with Tokyo and Seoul in dealing with North Korea, but it cannot ignore relations with China, which is increasing its presence in the international community. Washington's active engagement with China is necessary to get Beijing to stand with Tokyo, Washington and Seoul, but the US will have to strike a balance between its allies and China in addressing the North Korea issue.

On the other hand, the trilateral cooperation necessary to address the North Korean problem confronts a couple of challenges. This trilateral cooperation faces no major obstacles as long as it remains on the symbolic level, but problems emerge when it comes to actual security cooperation. Developments in the trilateral relationship since the shelling of Yeonpyeong show that South Korea is still reluctant to cooperate with Japan in the area of security. Trust between the two countries will continue to grow strong with the passage of time, but the three allies need to heed the differences in their stances when addressing the North Korean issue.

North Korea will accelerate moves to achieve its national goal of "opening the door to a strong and prosperous nation" in 2012. With the challenges mentioned in this article in mind, Japan, the United States and South Korea should strengthen cooperation to make North Korea understand that becoming a member of the international community would serve its interests and to get China to understand that cooperation with the three countries in addressing North Korea would be in its own interest as well. Whether these countries are able to cope with North Korea successfully is key to maintaining Northeast Asia's prosperity and development. 

Shunji Hiraiwa is Professor on North Korean issues at Kwansei Gakuin University in Hyogo.