

The DPRK Nuclear Issue in the Context of Japan – Republic of Korea Relations

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The issues of Japan - Republic of Korea (RK) relations are relevant in the framework of the East Asia security problems. The historic memory problem is topical since it brings up a range of controversies that obstacle the Japan - RK bilateral efficient cooperation. This research aims to analyse the DPRK nuclear issue as a common ground for the states to cooperate on.

The objective is to analyse the factor of the DPRK nuclear issue in the context of Japan - RK relations.

The research question is what role does the DPRK nuclear issue play in modern Japan - RK bilateral relations?

According to realist theory, Japan and RK should be allies since they share the same security goals and share the same regional ally - the USA. The same issue is present within liberal theory since both states share the same political regime, liberal-democratic values and rely on each other in economic terms. Still, they oppose each other. That is why this issue is approached within the constructivism theory in this research.

Results. The issues that contribute to Japan - RK efficient cooperation right now are scarce. Though, the DPRK nuclear issue is one of them since they have more or less symmetrical threat perceptions regarding North Korea. Nevertheless, RK - Japan relations even regarding DPRK denuclearisation had their ups and downs due to their strategic priorities which limited their incentives for security cooperation [1].

The key to Japan - RK relations in the context of DPRK issues is the 1998 RK - Japan Joint Declaration. This document was signed by then-Korean President Kim Dae-jung and then-Japanese Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo. The New Korea-Japan Partnership Joint Declaration in the twenty-first century proclaimed that Japan apologises to RK for its past, and RK promises to engage in future-oriented development of the relationship.

In the period from 2013 to 2014 RK prioritised the China - RK cooperative partnership addressing the DPRK issue. During the 2013-2015 period RK had more meetings with China (8 times) than with the US (4 times) regarding the North Korean nuclear missiles. Park Guen-Hye emphasised the US - RK - China cooperation over the US - RK - Japan framework. The latter was mentioned as a critical one for Japan.

With the following DPRK missile tests in 2016 Japan - RK strategic priorities converged. They timely overcame their historical issues to fight back against a mutually recognised threat. Right at that time, RK reconsidered its approach to tackling the DPRK denuclearization. It returned to tighter cooperation in a more “traditional” US - RK - Japan framework. Moreover, the states signed the Japan-ROK General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) on November 23rd.

The GSOMIA was terminated by Moon in 2019 in the wake of the Japan - RK trade dispute which was preceded by South Korean court decisions regarding wartime forced labour [3]. Japan pointed out the 1965 treaty which arguably settled all claims.

RK is a buffer zone and a crucial frontline against the nuclearising DPRK for Tokyo. While Seoul regards Japan as a host of the US military bases, able to provide critical logistical support for its allies which includes RK in the case of the Korean theatre of operations [2].

The strategic approaches of the states differ. Japan's approach to DPRK is a 'full-on sanctions' one. Especially because Japanese citizens being abducted by North Korea issue is still unresolved. While RK approaches this issue in another way, combining denuclearisation policy and uniting policy which is more intricate [1].

After the DPRK's new missile tests in the Autumn of 2022 the trilateral cooperation of US - RK - Japan renewed. South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol, U.S. President Joe Biden, and Japan Prime Minister Fumio Kishida met on the 13th of November on the sidelines of the ASEAN Summit in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The state leaders reaffirmed joint commitment to the DPRK nuclear issue elimination.

On November 2 the largest-ever South Korea-U.S. joint military air exercise "Vigilant Storm" was held. North Korea launched its Hwasong-17 intercontinental ballistic missile in response to South Korea-U.S. military exercises that same month.

Along with the trilateral meeting, the bilateral meeting of Yoon and Kishida was run. Both sides decided to strengthen the US - RK - Japan security cooperation. President Yoon as a representative of a conservative party strives to establish friendlier relations with Japan. During the meeting, the sides agreed to share "real-time missile warning data" to deal with the North's missile launches appropriately [4]. This statement most likely will lead Seoul and Japan to normalise their General Security of Military Intelligence Agreement (GSOMIA).

Conclusions. It is evident that the DPRK nuclear issue is of great importance in the context of Japan - RK relations. It aligns Japan and RK even in a wake of conflict. Regional security problems stimulate both states to cooperate defying all their controversies.

Whenever the DPRK armaments tests intensify Japan and RK long for each other. At such moments they cooperate more efficiently regarding their security as a top priority. Moreover, the participation of the USA is a pivotal factor in the Japan - RK DPRK nuclear issue decision-making process.

Though, memories of the past still haunt Japan - RK bilateral relations. Their view of regional security threats are quite symmetrical, but strategies and approaches differ significantly. That is why some tensions may arise.

Whenever Japan and RK find a common ground to elaborate further cooperation, their DPRK nuclear issue policy is the most efficient. Right now is exactly the moment when both states may boost their relations considerably by backing them up with US support and North Korean armaments provocative tests.

References

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