

**The US-Japan Alliance and North Korea**  
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The international press continues to concentrate on Kim Jong Il's faltering health and the Six Party Talks while Japan's mass media remains focused on the abduction issue. But something equally worrisome has been occurring. The US-Japan military alliance has weakened while North Korea's military power has strengthened. Japan's next prime minister and the next US president must note of this reality and deal with it.

The primary goals of the US-Japan alliance since 1954 remain to preserve peace and stability in Northeast Asia, and to provide for the two allies' common defense. Success requires close bilateral coordination. But since President George W. Bush entered the White House in January 2001, such cooperation has weakened while North Korea has grown more powerful.

Trilateral coordination between Washington, Tokyo and Seoul during the Clinton Administration had greatly restrained North Korea's ability to do as it wished. In 2000 it had only enough plutonium to make one or two nuclear bombs because its plutonium program had been "frozen" in 1994. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) provided 24 hour a day, seven days a week monitoring of North Korea's nuclear facilities. North Korea had also voluntarily declared a moratorium on testing ballistic missiles. Numerous problems remained to be resolved, but trilateral and international cooperation was sustaining progress toward halting North Korea's development of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

President Bush then shifted his nation's strategy from a multilateral to a unilateral approach. Instead of treating nuclear non-proliferation as a global concern, he pursued a bilateral regional approach. He openly dismissed the IAEA's assessment that Iraq had given up its nuclear weapons development program. Instead, based on unreliable intelligence, Bush ordered the unilateral invasion of Iraq to disarm it of WMD. He then pressed Japan and South Korea to commit troops and other support to the US occupation of Iraq. Subsequently US military forces were spread thin around the world while US allies proved increasingly reluctant to contribute to "Bush's war" in Iraq.

Bush decided to build a global unilateral anti-ballistic missile defense system rather than resume negotiations aimed at inducing hostile nations to end their ballistic missile development programs. This weakened international support for the multilateral Missile Technology Control Regime designed to restrict nations' ability to develop ballistic missiles. Bush's plan to extend the US anti-ballistic missile system into nations on Russia's edge intensified Washington-Moscow tensions. Meanwhile the untested system's reliability remains unknown.

In Northeast Asia, Bush's radical alteration of strategy toward North Korea has failed to achieve mutually beneficial results. His unilateral approach ended trilateral coordination. Pyongyang exploited this by successfully manipulating one ally against the other, i.e. Seoul against Washington and Tokyo. When Pyongyang decided in June 2006 to end its ballistic missile test moratorium, the three allies scrambled to form an ineffective united front. The allies also struggled to respond collectively to North Korea's nuclear test later that year. Most recently Pyongyang has successfully manipulated the Japanese abduction issue to spark tensions between Washington and Tokyo.

North Korea consequently today is militarily much stronger than eight years ago. It has a much larger stockpile of plutonium and has acquired more sophisticated nuclear weapons technology, much of it from the US ally Pakistan. Although North Korea's aging nuclear facility has been "disabled," at least temporarily, the location of Pyongyang's plutonium remains a mystery. Also, we know little about its highly enriched uranium (HEU) program and nuclear cooperation with Syria. All the while North Korea has been enhancing the sophistication of its ballistic missiles. We can only guess how soon it will be able to mount a nuclear warhead on a ballistic missile.

Diplomatically Pyongyang has also successfully exploited Bush's unilateralism to improve ties with Moscow and Beijing. Today North Korea has more in common with Moscow than eight years ago because of United States' efforts to extend its anti-ballistic missile defense system to Russia's border. China remains reluctant to serve as Bush's "hammer" to pound Pyongyang into submission regarding its nuclear program. South Korea is divided over whether to follow Washington's preferred strategy or to continue its economic engagement of North Korea. Most recently, when Washington abruptly shifted toward a more conciliatory posture toward Pyongyang, Tokyo adopted a more resolute stance.

The unavoidable conclusion is that the United States' unilateralism of the past eight years has eroded the effectiveness and strength of the US-Japan defense alliance. Most obvious is the continuing withdrawal of US military forces from South Korea and Japan, largely to reinforce the US commitment to fight the "war on terrorism" in Iraq and Afghanistan. At the same time, domestic political pressure in Japan and South Korea has compelled them to reduce their military commitments in the same area. Surely this is welcome news to North Korea's military leadership because it is indicative of weakening cooperation between the allies. At the same time, unrestrained by commitments to international treaties and coordinated diplomatic pressure, North Korea continues to strengthen its military might.

Neither Japan's new prime minister nor the new president of the United States can ignore these developments. Most importantly, they need to join together, preferably with South Korea, to forge a more effective strategy to reinforce the US-Japan alliance and to deal with North Korea more effectively.