



## Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

121/16

# U.S. ELECTIONS AND JAPAN'S NATIONAL SECURITY

Dr Preeti Nalwa

*Honorary Research Associate, CAPS*

The outcome of the impending U.S. presidential election on 8 November 2016 holds considerable significance for Japan's national security. The dominant view in Japan is that the new president, if it is Hillary Clinton, will be reassuring for Japan but if Donald Trump is elected into office it will mean that Japan might have to recalibrate its security policy. This view has gained primacy because during the presidential campaign, while Clinton reiterated security guarantees provided to Japan under the U.S.-Japan Treaty that commits the U.S. to defend Japan if it comes under attack; Trump accused Japan for free riding on the U.S. security assurances. In his speeches, Trump advocated Japan's nuclear armament, and withdrawal of the U.S. nuclear extended deterrence. The option of an independent nuclear deterrent is opposed to Japan's minimalist defensive defense policy dictated by Article 9, the 'peace clause', of its Constitution. Article 9 forbids Japan to acquire offensive military capabilities along with its three Non-Nuclear Principles introduced by PM

Eisaku Sato in 1967. Therefore, despite having the capability to go nuclear, Japan's legal and normative nuclear denial compels it to be dependent upon the U.S. nuclear umbrella. This self-restraint averts nuclear arms racing and mitigates the spiral of security dilemma in nuclear East Asia. In the context of power transition in Asia where China is seeking dominance, an erosion of the U.S. forward military presence would weaken the military component of the "pivot" logic of the U.S. rebalance to Asia creating an unchallenged strategic opportunity for the culmination of Sino-centric Asia. The primacy of an aggressive China not only renders Japan vulnerable but also poses a potential systemic threat.

The ramifications of Trump's foreign policy approach towards the U.S. alliance partners are severe for the military and geopolitical balance in East Asia. Consequently, his politico-strategic credentials have also been questioned in the U.S. media. Hence, there is clear preference for Clinton in Japan amongst its policy makers,



commentators on its security issues, experts in academia and in social media. However, Clinton's support for the U.S.-Japan alliance and Trump's "Japan bashing" intersected with other important development that directly impinge upon Japan's national security. This development is the advancement in North Korea's nuclear weapons technology signified by two nuclear tests this year, on 6 January and on 9 September, its fourth and fifth respectively. North Korea launched about 24 ballistic missiles in 2016, including a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) that reached Japan's air defence identification zone (ADIZ) for the first time. In his address to the UN General Assembly on 21 September, the Japanese PM Shinzo Abe said that the threat posed by North Korea's nuclear tests and missile launches has reached a dimension altogether different from what has transpired until now. He pointed out that "Ballistic missiles to be launched from submarines. Nuclear warheads to be mounted on ballistic missiles. North Korea is without a doubt poised to have these in its possession."<sup>1</sup>

The North Korean regime has often been characterised as 'rogue', 'irrational', 'mad', stricken with serious lapses in human behaviour and judgment. Even though North Korea is an asymmetrical power, the real threat lies in the fact that in case of conflict, believing in its nuclear invulnerability, it is capable of serious miscalculation. In a situation of crisis, any development of imperfect, irresponsible command and control would cost huge innocent

lives. In his UN speech PM Abe emphasised the urgency of responding to North Korea's nuclear provocations "in a manner entirely distinct from our responses thus far." Contrary to this exhortation, Japan and U.S. have responded with slapping more punitive sanctions against North Korea. The US has additionally decided to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in South Korea, an anti-missile system. This decision, a defensive strategy against nuclear North Korea, implicitly indicates the assumption of the US that nuclear North Korea is here to stay. This assumption is a deviation from its policy of "strategic patience" which envisages a regime collapse that would open a window for its denuclearisation.

The idea of regime collapse is untenable. Kim Jong-un has steadily solidified his power base through internal purges and by leveraging the nuclear status of North Korea within his nation. He demonstrates to the world his unquestioned control over his country by showcasing the technological breakthroughs in its nuclear weapons capability. The last nuclear test was conducted amid claims about North Korea's success in mounting a nuclear warhead on ballistic missile. An unhindered *de facto* nuclear status of North Korea is dangerous given the fact that the sanctions regime has failed to dampen its nuclear ambitions. It will mean that it will continue to increase its nuclear weapons capability and the number of nuclear weapons. In a broadcast in September, North Korea's official

news channel KCNA had announced that "The standardisation of the nuclear warhead will enable the DPRK to produce at will and as many as it wants a variety of smaller, lighter and diversified nuclear warheads of higher strike power".<sup>2</sup> This is problematic for Japan because if the number of nuclear weapons reaches a certain threshold, anti-missile systems might not be able to provide absolute protection. Hence, the US extended deterrence is critical for Japan. Trump's presidency will require Japan to develop additional independent capabilities for security against the unpredictable North Korea. Even though, it might be difficult for Trump, if in office, to unravel the deeply entrenched defence ties with Japan, described in 1983 as the "unsinkable aircraft carrier" by the Japanese PM Yasuhiro Nakasone, his transactional approach towards alliances is worrisome. However, for Japan, the Clinton presidency will not mean complacency either because the US policy towards nuclear North Korea evince a logic of strategic tolerance because it's nuclear provocations justifies its extended deterrence. A hostile nuclear North Korea and an aggressive China would demand Japan to ensure a maximum return on its minimum defensive defense capabilities irrespective of Clinton or Trump in the White House.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

---

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Speeches and Statements by the Prime Minister, available at [http://japan.kantei.go.jp/97\\_abe/statement/201609/71unga.html](http://japan.kantei.go.jp/97_abe/statement/201609/71unga.html), accessed on 3 November, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Seyoon Kim, Hooyeon Kim and Shinhye Kang "North Korea Says Tested Nuclear Bomb, Can Miniaturize Arms", *Bloomberg*, 9 September, 2016, available at <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-09-09/shallow-earthquake-detected-near-north-korea-nuclear-test-site>, accessed on 3 November, 2016.