Japan’s absence from frontline diplomacy on the North Korea crisis is undermining international efforts to bring about a lasting peace. A close alliance with Tokyo is essential for American and European interests in East Asia.

The Patriot-Advanced Capability-3 interceptor is Japan’s last line of defense against a potential missile strike from North Korea. Its high-velocity, anti-ballistic missiles are designed to stop the delivery of a heavy

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The European Union should consider playing a larger role as a mediator in the North Korean crisis.
- The United States can use its diplomatic weight to help Japan solve the abductee issue with North Korea.
- In the face of their shared security threat, Japan should take steps to ease current tensions with South Korea.
payload, or even a potential nuclear or chemical attack, and the killing of tens of thousands in Japanese cities and American military bases in the country.

Visiting Tokyo in March 2017, I spotted the PAC-3 battery in the grounds of Japan’s Ministry of Defense. Surrounded by barbed wire and soldiers, the camouflage green launch station, pointing upwards to a blue sky in the heart of Tokyo, was a vivid reminder of just how seriously Japanese decision-makers view the threat from North Korea.

However, despite the alarm in Japan over the North Korean threat in recent years, Tokyo has been on the sidelines of the crisis. Japan’s absence from frontline diplomacy on North Korea is merely undermining international efforts to bring about a lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula. Tokyo is an essential American ally with a growing willingness to play a larger security role in the region increasing capabilities to do so. If hostilities with North Korea are calmed and genuine moves are made by Pyongyang to denuclearize and stand down its missile programme, Japan can be a vital player in providing aid and economic assistance to help the North Koreans come out of international isolation.

**Tokyo’s security challenges**

Japan’s Prime Minister was the first world leader to meet Donald Trump after he won the 2016 US presidential elections. Since entering the White House Trump has met regularly with Abe, with the North Korea crisis weighing heavily on their mutual deliberations.

At the same time, however, Trump’s ‘America First’ agenda has brought fears of a potential de-coupling of the Japan-US security alliance, while a lingering trade dispute continues to cause friction in the relationship. After Pyongyang’s testing of two Hwasong-14 inter-continental ballistic missiles in July 2017 demonstrated its potential to strike the American mainland, some Japanese experts, including Professor Kazuto Suzuki of Hokkaido University, questioned the US commitment to protect Japan should North Korean missiles target the US directly.

Japan is determined to settle the issue of the 17 Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea in the 1970s and 1980s

**What does Japan want from North Korea?** Like others it wants a peaceful and nuclear-free Korean Peninsula. But Tokyo also wants to play an active role in negotiating that goal.
For Japan, North Korea’s aggression is nothing new. Japan has long been a target of Pyongyang’s missile arsenal. North Korean ballistic missiles tests in 1993 and 1998 shocked the Japanese people, who had adopted a constitution renouncing war and developed a deep pacifist ethos following World War II and the American occupation. Yet the gravity of Japan’s perilous security position has only deepened as North Korea’s missile and nuclear capabilities have continued to grow over the past two decades.

Unlike past crises, however, Kim Jong-un’s threat in 2017 to ‘bring nuclear clouds to the Japanese archipelago’ came at a time when Tokyo was already facing on-going tensions with China over territorial disputes in the East China Sea and an inconsistent and at times erratic American foreign policy under President Trump. Heading deeper into 2019, little progress has been made by North Korea in dismantling its missile system and starting on the path towards denuclearization.

Japan’s priorities on North Korea
What does Japan want from North Korea? Like others it wants a peaceful and nuclear-free Korean Peninsula. But Tokyo also wants to play an active role in negotiating that goal. President Trump’s volatile relations with his North Korean counterpart have unnerved Tokyo. If the US president’s approach failed and war came to the Korean Peninsula, South Korea and Japan would be hit the hardest by North Korea’s short and medium-range missiles. ‘Japan feels neglected on the North Korean issue,’ Shutaro Sano, a professor at the National Defense Academy told me in Tokyo last autumn. ‘It is not at the negotiating table, even though it has much to lose in the outcome.’

Multinational diplomacy on North Korea may be forthcoming, but as North Korea’s leader continues to meet one-on-one with his South Korean, Chinese and American counterparts, Tokyo remains largely on the outside looking in. Despite Tokyo’s efforts, a Kim-Abe summit has not yet been arranged, politically a loss of face for the Japanese leader. And there is a fear in Japan that its weak position at the negotiating table might make it a good target for a North Korean attack should conflict break out.

A multilateral approach, such as returning to the Six-Party talks on North Korea, which Beijing has also called for, could place Japan in a better position to secure its interests. Keeping Tokyo on ice may be a
mistake on the part of North Korea and other regional powers. ‘North Korea needs Japan for its future economic assistance,’ a Japanese security expert told me, ‘and Japan needs to play this card.’

Getting past the abduction issue

Japan is also determined to settle the issue of North Korea’s abductions of 17 of its citizens in the 1970s and 1980s. Former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi was able to secure the repatriation of five in 2002. North Korea claimed that other abductees had died and that the issue was closed, but Prime Minister Abe has made returning any remaining abductees his ‘life’s work’. The prime minister’s commitment to the abduction issue is also a principal concern of many Japanese when it comes to North Korea. President Trump promised to bring up the issue for Japan at the Singapore summit in June 2018, but it did not appear in the final agreement he signed with Kim. Tensions with Tokyo on security and trade made Trump an unappealing messenger for Japanese security interests, and some fear Trump’s position becoming a permanent aspect of American foreign policy.

However, priorities might need to change in Tokyo as well. Given the time span since the original abductions took place, Yuki Tatsumi, Director of the Japan Program at the Stimson Center, has suggested decoupling the abduction issue from any nuclear and missile talks. But this move would be another political blow for the Japanese prime minister, whose reputation has already been battered by corruption scandals in recent years. If he wishes to achieve his goal of amending Japan’s peace constitution, Abe will need all the political backing he can get.

Remaking Japan’s security approach

Nonetheless, living on a sea of troubles with the North Korean threat, China’s military incursions in the East China Sea and its shaky relations with US President Trump, Tokyo has not stood still. While still facing domestic resistance to any reinterpretation of its pacifist constitution, there is a growing consensus among Japanese security experts that Tokyo has little choice but to gradually build up its strategic autonomy, increase the flexibility of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces and forge new security partnerships across the region. Japan passed new security legislation in 2015 that allowed its Self-Defense Forces to come to the military aid of its allies, and Tokyo has gradually raised its defense budget. Japan’s new National Defense Program Guidelines call for the modification of its existing Izumo-class flat-top helicopter carriers to carry new F-35B fighter jets, and Tokyo is busy building closer security partnerships with India, the United Kingdom, France, Australia, Vietnam, and other South East Asian countries.

Reviving multilateralism on North Korea

Meanwhile the United States and the European Union can do much to get Tokyo more involved on North Korea. Assisting in resolving the abduction issue would help untie Abe’s hands to play a larger role in unwinding North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs. In light of the current US-China tensions, the EU could take on a larger role as a negotiator in the crisis. If Brussels wants to uphold multilateralism and a rules-based global order, it should actively support the interests of its strategic partners.

Japan has to change its behaviour too. Military provocations with South Korea in recent months have eroded already strained relations between Tokyo and Seoul over Japan’s past colonization of the Korean Peninsula. Prioritizing North Korea appears to be out of line with the reality of Tokyo’s security challenges.

Japan needs its allies, and its allies need Japan. Mutual interest in a multilateral approach to North Korea needs to be taken seriously so that Japan and its Asian neighbours will never need to use its last line of defense.