

The Korean Security Paradox: North Korea's Nuclear Threat vs the Complexity of Trilateral Cooperation Between China, South Korea, and Japan

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the security paradox in East Asia posed by the North Korean nuclear threat and the complexity of trilateral cooperation between China, South Korea, and Japan. This study uses a qualitative explanatory method with a descriptive-analytic approach, drawing on library research and secondary sources. The results show that the evolution of North Korea's nuclear doctrine has increased regional strategic uncertainty, driven military modernization across neighboring states, and deepened geopolitical polarization. Trilateral cooperation faces eight major obstacles: historical burdens, economic dependence, and differences in strategic perceptions, great power rivalry, security paradoxes, mutual distrust, institutional instability, and the trauma of multilateral diplomacy. This study concludes that common threats do not automatically generate collective solidarity, but rather produce fragmented responses shaped by each country's national interest calculations. The implications of this study provide academic contributions to understanding the dynamics of East Asian regional security, particularly the interaction between military threats and geopolitical interests in shaping complex patterns of cooperation.

Keywords: *East Asian Security, North Korean Nuclear Program, Trilateral Cooperation, Security Dilemma, Strategic Hedging*

INTRODUCTION

East Asia is a region characterized by a notably complex security landscape in the contemporary international system, shaped by competition among major powers, compounded by a documented history of conflict and a rapid pace of military modernization. North Korea's nuclear program has emerged as a critical factor exerting significant influence on the stability of the East Asian region. Following its withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003, North Korea has continued to develop its nuclear capabilities and ballistic missile systems as integral components of its national strategy. Tosaki (2017) explains that North Korea's nuclear policy has shifted from serving solely as a regime-protection mechanism to functioning as an active deterrent encompassing both military and diplomatic dimensions, thereby affecting the security calculations of countries near North Korea and throughout the East Asian region.

Tosaki (2017) argues that North Korea's nuclear capabilities serve both as deterrents and diplomatic leverage of deterrence and a tool for diplomatic engagement. The Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS) asserts that the enhancement of second-strike capabilities and the adoption of a tactical nuclear strategy signal a pivot toward an increasingly adaptive deterrence approach. Research published in the National Security Journal of International Studies NCJIS (2024) finds that military modernization and alliance reliance exacerbate the region's security dilemma. Conversely, the Small Wars Journal (2025) argues trilateral cooperation between the United States, South Korea, and Japan has simultaneously fueled tensions with China. Aoki (2021) argues that historical antecedents and geopolitical disputes hinder collaborative security efforts in East Asia, while research conducted by Soft Wedging (2024) suggests that China is responding through non-military methodologies, including diplomatic and economic strategies. This research aims to provide a more comprehensive analysis by integrating of North Korea's nuclear strategy, the dynamics of trilateral cooperation, and the responses of leading states in the region.

This study outlines three key objectives that are crucial to the North Korean nuclear threat. First, it investigates the consequences of the evolution of North Korea's nuclear strategy on East Asian security stability; second, it identifies the strategies employed by three East Asian countries in response to North Korea's advancing nuclear capabilities; and third, it explores the barriers to the efficacy of trilateral cooperation between China, South Korea, and Japan. This study addresses these issues through a qualitative approach, incorporating a literature review that draws on academic journals, policy reports, and scholarly publications. Through the methodology and approaches employed in this study, the aim is to explain the interaction patterns, causal relationships, and strategic dynamics that contribute to the formation of the security paradox in the East Asian region.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theory of nuclear deterrence is widely applied in analyses of security transformations in East Asia regarding the nuclear threat from North Korea. Thomas C. Schelling (1966) argued that the strategic significance of nuclear weapons lies not in the capacity to assess and predict an adversary's risks, but rather in the ability to carry out their use. Deterrence operates through the lens of perception rather than mere physical capability. This perception encompasses the authenticity of the threat, the potential for retaliation, and strategic communication. The evolution of ballistic missile technology and second-strike capabilities signals a transition from defensive deterrence toward a more proactive and politically nuanced form of deterrence in the North Korean context. Nevertheless, the scholarly discourse on deterrence primarily focuses on the rational logic of bilateral state interactions, thereby complicating explanations of how deterrence triggers transformations in the broader regional security architecture.

The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever (2003), addresses these challenges. This framework posits that security threats are geographically defined, resulting in increasingly interconnected and mutually influential relationships among states within a given region. East Asia is viewed as a multifaceted security puzzle. North Korea's nuclear agenda has implications not only for South Korea and Japan but also for China's strategic calculus. However, the RSCT prioritizes patterns of threat interdependence over policy response variables. Consequently, this theoretical approach has not comprehensively explained the reasons behind the limited and uninstitutionalized cooperation among states situated within the same security complex.

To address these limitations, Evelyn Goh (2005) introduced the strategic hedging strategy, which offers a more dynamic perspective on state behavior. Hedging is a versatile strategy that allows governments to navigate uncertainty

by simultaneously combining elements of competition and cooperation, without succumbing to the dilemma of choosing between bandwagoning and balancing. In East Asia, Japan and South Korea have strengthened their security alliances with the United States while maintaining their economic dependence on China. Conversely, China has adopted a selective stabilization strategy with respect to North Korea. While this approach can explain the adaptability of national strategies, most existing studies remain fragmented, concentrating on individual state policies in isolation, thus failing to provide a holistic understanding of trilateral relational dynamics.

Drawing from the three theoretical frameworks mentioned above, the extant literature reveals significant gaps in analytical discourse. Deterrence theory explains the strategic role of nuclear weapons, RSCT describes the structural interconnectedness of regional security, and hedging strategies explain diverse state responses to uncertainty. However, the integration of these three perspectives into a unified analytical framework remains limited, particularly in articulating how North Korea's nuclear threat catalyzes cooperation while simultaneously widening policy differences between China, South Korea, and Japan. Consequently, this study seeks to bridge this analytical gap by investigating the linkages between the evolution of North Korea's nuclear strategy and the security paradoxes embodied in trilateral cooperation in East Asia. This approach aims to contribute a more integrative perspective to security studies in the region.

METHODOLOGY

This article uses an exploratory qualitative research approach. This approach focuses on observing and analyzing naturally occurring phenomena in real life, without manipulating specific conditions. Qualitative research is often called descriptive research because it aims to describe a phenomenon in depth using empirical data, which in this study takes the form of a case study approach. The term "exploratory" indicates that this research and understand the reasons behind an event or phenomenon that occurs repeatedly over a period of time. The main focus is to answer the question "how" in accordance with the established research objectives. Furthermore, the data analysis technique in this study is carried out through a literature review, namely by collecting data and information from literature sources related to the topic or problem being studied. This data is obtained by reading and studying various sources, such as books relevant to the research topic. The objective is to gain a deeper understanding of the issue under investigation. In this study, a qualitative method is employed using a descriptive-analytical approach. This approach involves systematically and objectively describing existing facts, followed by analysis to understand the data, identify relationships among phenomena, and explain the underlying meanings of the phenomena under investigation (Sugiyono: 2009; 29). This study employs a descriptive-analytical approach to explore security dynamics on the Korean Peninsula and the challenges in trilateral cooperation among South Korea, Japan, and China. The descriptive approach is used to present structured facts regarding North Korea's nuclear threats and the development of diplomatic relations at the regional level. Meanwhile, the analytical approach is used to analyze these phenomena by referring to concepts in the study of International Relations.

DISCUSSION

The North Korean nuclear threat and its impact on East Asian security stability

The nuclear threat from North Korea has influenced security dynamics in the East Asian region for the past twenty years. Since its formal withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003, the North Korean regime has steadily advanced its nuclear capabilities, along with its ballistic missile technology. This progress signals not only an increase in military power but also a substantive shift in the strategic orientation of the country's policy framework.

Tosaki (2017) argues that North Korea's nuclear strategy has shifted from a simple national defense mechanism to a proactive deterrent instrument in diplomatic and military contexts. This research explains that nuclear weapons serve as a crucial lever for shaping regional security paradigms, particularly influencing the behavioral responses of neighboring states (Tosaki, 2017). The doctrine of nuclear proliferation has been highly influential in this transformation. Warden (2021) articulates that North Korea is not only focused on establishing a credible second-strike capability but has also begun exploring tactical nuclear options for potential initial conflict scenarios, suggesting a possible lowering of the threshold for nuclear weapons use. The sophistication of this doctrine has heightened

strategic uncertainty in East Asia. This situation requires other countries to navigate the accelerated escalation of conflict, characterized by its unpredictable nature and potential for occurrence at any time (Warden, 2021).

The development of North Korea's nuclear program in 2021 and 2024 indicates rapid qualitative improvement. According to Kristensen and Korda (2022), North Korea possesses approximately 20 nuclear warheads and sufficient fissile material to construct additional nuclear devices. Its potential production capacity is 45 to 55 nuclear devices. Furthermore, the increase in the explosive yield of these devices, from below 1 kiloton to approximately 160 kilotons, signals substantial technological progress, with indications suggesting the possible development of a hydrogen bomb. Furthermore, the study concludes that such weaponization increases North Korea's perceived deterrent power and worsens threat perceptions in East Asia. This dynamic suggests increased stability across the region. Tosaki (2017) asserts that North Korea's nuclear strategy has evolved from a basic instrument of state defense to a proactive deterrent in military and diplomatic efforts, prompting South Korea and Japan to strengthen their missile defense infrastructure and foster collaborative efforts. This research demonstrates that nuclear capabilities are a crucial mechanism for shaping regional security, particularly in light of actions by neighboring states (Tosaki, 2017). Furthermore, it highlights that, in addition to adapting to imminent threats, such responses give rise to increased reliance on external alliances (Tosaki, 2017).

North Korea's geographical proximity to the capital Seoul, 50 kilometers from the demilitarized zone (DMZ), makes South Korea highly vulnerable to this threat. According to Manoe (2022), this situation exacerbates conventional and nuclear military aggression. The findings of this study indicate that increasing threat perceptions force countries in the region to enhance their military capabilities, which could ultimately trigger an arms race in East Asia. Enhanced defense capabilities do not directly promote stability within the framework of security concerns. A study conducted by the NCJIS (2024) argues that the amplification of military power in the region, on the contrary, increases international threat perceptions. This study explains that defensive initiatives, such as upgrading defense systems, can be interpreted as offensive threats by neighboring countries, including North Korea and China.

Geopolitics and alliances in East Asia are also affected by the North Korean nuclear threat. Aoki (2021) explains that collaboration between the United States, Japan, and South Korea has been further strengthened through increased security coordination and military exercises. The findings suggest that while the alliance's strengthening is intended to enhance stability, it simultaneously raises concerns in China, which perceives it as an attempt to limit its strategic influence (Aoki, 2021). One key finding of this research is the security paradox: efforts to create stability through prevention actually increase the risk of conflict. Therefore, East Asia remains vulnerable to disasters and strategic misunderstandings, despite its relative stability (NCJIS, 2024; Aoki, 2021).

Obstacles faced in trilateral cooperation between China, South Korea, and Japan in responding to the North Korean nuclear threat

Trilateral cooperation between China, South Korea, and Japan in responding to the North Korean nuclear threat represents a highly complex dynamic of international relations, trapped in what is known as "unstable stability" a condition that appears calm or powerful on the surface but is actually fragile and at high risk of collapse. The first obstacle to this trilateral cooperation is the deep historical burdens especially between South Korea and Japan. Although in 2023, South Korea began to compromise on historical issues for the sake of national interests in the fields of defense and economics, past sentiments related to the Japanese colonial era remain a systemic obstacle that hinders public trust and consistent security cooperation. On the other hand, China and South Korea often use the historical narrative of World War II when opposing Japanese militarism as a diplomatic tool to win Seoul's sympathy and exert psychological pressure on Tokyo.

The second obstacle is closely related to the dilemma between national security and economic dependence, particularly for South Korea on China. The deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system shows that Seoul's efforts to counter North Korean missiles triggered a strong reaction from Beijing, leading to economic sanctions. This has forced South Korea to adopt compromise policies such as the "Three No's" no additional THAAD batteries, no participation in the US missile defense system, and no formation of a trilateral military alliance with the US and Japan to restore trade relations with China. Economic dependence often hampers trilateral coordination, as Seoul must avoid appearing too closely aligned with the Western security bloc.

Disagreements over perceptions of strategic stability pose as third obstacle. Japan and South Korea have differing views on managing their alliance with the United States. Japan tends to favor maximum US involvement in balancing regional power. On the other hand, South Korea, especially under progressive governments, tends to pursue a hedging strategy and is more open to a regional vision that does not rely on a hegemonic US military presence. These differing orientations make difficult for the three countries to formulate a coherent, shared vision in the face of Pyongyang's nuclear provocations, due to concerns that military buildup on one side will trigger an arms race on the other.

The fourth obstacle arises from the great power rivalry between the United States and China, which casts a shadow over this trilateral mechanism. China views the strengthening of security cooperation between South Korea and Japan, supported by the United States, as an attempt to strategically encircle its interests, particularly regarding the Taiwan issue. President Xi Jinping frequently emphasizes that Seoul and Tokyo should make the "right strategic choice" and respect Beijing's core interests rather than fully tilting toward Washington (the United States). Geopolitical competition means that any trilateral initiative pressure North Korea directly conflicts with China's core interest in keeping the Pyongyang regime while expanding stable, since Beijing views expanded US influence on its border as a strategic threat it cannot accept.

The fifth obstacle is the security paradox: efforts to enhance defense capabilities actually increase insecurity in the region. North Korea exploits its neighboring countries, South Korea and Japan, by leveraging the United States' nuclear deterrence (extended deterrence). The rise in nuclear salience exacerbates the security dilemma, where preventive measures taken by Seoul or Tokyo are often perceived as preparations for aggression by Pyongyang and China.

The sixth obstacle is mutual distrust among regional actors. Peace on the Korean Peninsula is not maintained through reconciliation, but rather through war readiness and offensive military intelligence. Joint military exercises between the United States and South Korea are often viewed as provocations by North Korea and are viewed with suspicion by China as a threat to the strategic balance in Northeast Asia. Without mutual trust any agreements reached at the trilateral summit are often merely normative and lack strong implementation regarding denuclearization.

Seventh, the challenge of cooperation is hampered by political changes in each country. In 2024, the 9th Trilateral Summit in Seoul will reactivate the mechanism once more, with the same leadership as in 2019 regarding bilateral diplomatic interference. Differences in political systems and leadership decisions to comprehensively shift foreign policy priorities creating a long-term plan to address nuclear North Korea lost momentum before achieving the desired results.

The final, eighth obstacle is multilateral diplomacy, such as the Six-Party Talks, which provide diplomatic opportunities for all involved parties. North Korea is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and has implemented a weapons of mass destruction program. This negative experience has made China, South Korea, and Japan eager to identify new, trustworthy avenues for negotiation to address persistent issues. As a result, trilateral cooperation focuses more on economic and technical aspects, such as FTAs or supply chains. Additionally, the issue of denuclearization remains a significant obstacle that must be overcome due to the differences in national interests among the countries.

China - South Korea- Japan's main strategy in responding to the North Korean nuclear threat

The North Korean nuclear threat has transformed the security landscape in East Asia. Pyongyang's nuclear doctrine demonstrates that the possession of nuclear weapons has assumed a significant role in the country's defense strategy, transcending its previous utility as a mere instrument of diplomatic coercion (INSS, 2023). Consequently, this development significantly limits the prospects for achieving a resolution through denuclearization dialogue, making regional security assessments increasingly precarious. Research findings suggest that prevailing conditions are forcing countries in the region to engage in diplomatic initiatives and geopolitical maneuvering, increasing their reliance on military responses.

China adopts a prudent and non-aggressive stance. To maintain balance within the region, China refrains from using direct military coercion, instead opting for non-military tactics such as economic diplomacy and engagement in multilateral forums (Soft Wedging Study, 2024). Conversely, China's position on the North Korean nuclear dispute demonstrates strategic ambivalence: it resists extreme pressure that might destabilize the region while prioritizing

overall calm (DGSJ, 2023). The study suggests that, rather than seeking total eradication of the nuclear threat, China's primary concern lies in mitigating the risks of conflict to prevent escalation into broader instability.

Because South Korea faces a more direct threat than China, it employs a strategy combining deterrence and diplomacy. To maintain the image of deterring North Korea, strengthening military cooperation with the United States is crucial (Tosaki, 2017). However, this approach is not entirely coercive, as it still requires reducing the likelihood of escalation (Scholar Hub UI, 2023). The results of this study indicate that South Korea's strategy has undergone significant changes and is heavily influenced by shifts in domestic political leadership, leading to policy shifts between hardline and cooperative approaches.

Meanwhile, in response to North Korea's nuclear threats, Japan has gradually shifted its security policy. Enhanced defense capabilities and more active engagement in trilateral cooperation demonstrate Japan's efforts to strengthen its strategic position in the region (Small Wars Journal, 2025). Japan has begun to focus on nonconventional security aspects, such as technology and the economy, as well as the protection of strategic supply chains, in addition to military aspects (Taylor & Francis, 2025; NCJIS, 2022). This study indicates that, while remaining dependent on its alliance with the U.S., Japan is assuming a more proactive security role.

Overall, the responses of China, South Korea, and Japan to North Korea's nuclear threats indicate that they have not yet fully cooperated or integrated. Maintaining regional stability is a shared interest for all three parties. However, stronger cooperation is hindered by divergent strategic interests and geopolitical rivalries (Aoki, 2021; NCJIS, 2024). This study finds that shared threats do not always trigger a unified response; rather, they alter national strategies, highlighting the security paradox in East Asia.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The North Korean nuclear threat has created security inconsistencies in East Asia, a common threat that should be a unifying factor for East Asian countries has instead resulted in a grouped or fragmented response, resulting in its own complexities of national interests, geopolitical rivalries and the dynamics of great power competition between the United States and China. Then, such as the evolution of Pyongyang's nuclear doctrine to be higher and oriented towards controlled escalation including the integration of tactical nuclear weapons in initial conflict scenarios has sharpened regional strategic calculations and also encouraged South Korea and Japan to strengthen their alliances with the United States with an extended deterrence framework, while China responded with a soft wedging approach to limit security consolidation without engaging in confrontation. Trilateral cooperation between China, South Korea, and Japan has proven to be functional but fragile, hampered by eight interrelated structural factors, ranging from the burden of colonial history, national security dilemmas, differences in strategic perceptions, the rivalry of the US and China's great powers, the paradox of regional security, mistrust, instability of domestic institutionalism, to the failure of multilateral diplomacy in the past such as the Six-Party talks. Based on these findings and research, this study recommends that stakeholders (*confidence building measures*) be more structured and sustainable in expanding cooperation in non-military sectors such as economics and technology as the initial foundation for long-term stability, as well as encouraging forums in comprehensive multilateral cooperation engagement to create a more credible negotiation basis to face the challenges of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

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