Among threats and a “perfect excuse”: understanding change in Japanese foreign security policy

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This article is written against the backdrop of widely discussed changes in Japanese foreign security policy in the 2000s—changes often attributed to an intensifying North Korea threat and growing rivalry with China. Employing Walt’s notion of “threat” (in effect, offensive power plus aggressive intentions), the thesis of this article is that China and North Korea could be construed as increasingly threatening to Japan. The antithesis is that changes in Japanese foreign security policy have rather taken place within the context of a public discourse that has increasingly framed China and North Korea as “threats.” The article demonstrates that, while Chinese military capability has burgeoned in the past decade, North Korea has experienced something like military stagnation. Moreover, although both actors have histories of foreign aggression, their respective official discourses lack aggressive intentions vis-à-vis Japan. The article also demonstrates that while Japanese government sources have kept framing North Korea as a threat or a grave security concern, China has merely been depicted as “in need of further attention.” To understand these ambivalent results, the article introduces the synthesizing idea that a North Korean “threat” might serve as a “perfect excuse” for changing Japanese foreign security policy in the face of what could obviously be construed as a more pressing China threat.

Introduction

Up until and even beyond the end of the Cold War, scholars voiced different and sometimes even theoretically opposed reasons for predicting stability and continuity in Japanese foreign and security policy. Nevertheless, in the early and mid-2000s the community of Japan specialists suddenly became more preoccupied with Japan’s allegedly changing approach to world affairs. The scholarly literature includes several, fairly strong, expressions of this interpretation. The distinguished historian Kenneth B. Pyle, for instance, recently wrote that “there are many indications that Japan is on the verge of another sea change in its international orientation … moving from a period of single-minded pursuit of economic power to a more orthodox international role in which it will be deeply engaged in political-military affairs.” Many others agree that a major shift is under way, and talk about this change process in terms of “normalization” or even “remilitarization.” Important examples of change include (1) the growing public and political acceptance of revision of the Constitution’s Article 9, which expresses Japan’s renunciation of war; (2) a nascent debate on Japanese nuclear weapons after the first North Korean nuclear test in October 2006; (3) the introduction of a Japanese Ballistic Missile
Defense (BMD) and the fact that the Air Self-Defense Force (ASDF) is close to possessing the capability to execute pre-emptive strikes; (4) the introduction of new or updated defensive capabilities, currently under way in all branches of the Self-Defense Forces (SDF); (5) the dispatch of troops to the Indian Ocean (from 2001) and Iraq (between 2003 and 2008) outside the scope of United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations for the first time after World War II; and (6) the transformation of Japan’s Defense Agency (JDA) into a full ministry in 2007, signaling that security issues have now been elevated to the same level as in many other countries.6

Although it is clear that recent developments undermine the notion that Japanese foreign security policy is averse to change,7 there is no consensus as to what caused changes such as those listed above to occur in the first place. Neorealists such as Kenneth N. Waltz are probably not very surprised; for more than a decade and a half they have been predicting that Japan will acquire political and military power commensurate with its great economic capability, including nuclear weapons.8 These neorealists could now claim that Japan has finally been given a sufficiently large injection of realpolitik, at least to start transforming in accordance with the maxims of their theory. According to some, that injection of realpolitik would consist primarily in an allegedly intensifying threat from the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea) and an allegedly growing rivalry with the People’s Republic of China (PRC, China).9 In public statements former Prime Minister Jun’ichirō Koizumi even justified the Japanese decision to contribute troops to the postwar reconstruction effort in Iraq from 2003 with reference to an immediate North Korean threat and the need to maintain a credible alliance with the United States.10

In line with the expectation of many Japan specialists, the running thesis of this article is that China and North Korea could be construed as increasingly threatening to Japan. The thesis is developed by employing a neorealist notion of “threat,” adapted from Stephen M. Walt. According to Walt, the criteria for judging whether a country is to be called a threat include (1) “aggregate power,” defined as the total resources that a state has under its command, including “population, industrial and military capability, and technological prowess”;11 (2) “geographical proximity,” referring simply to the fact that physical distance makes other countries’ capabilities seem less threatening;12 (3) “offensive power,” i.e. a state’s ability “to threaten the sovereignty or territorial integrity of another state at an acceptable cost”;13 and (4) “aggressive intentions.” According to Walt, states that act aggressively or express aggressive intentions are more likely to provoke balancing behavior toward them.14

This article does not employ Walt’s conceptual framework for theorizing Japanese balancing behavior vis-à-vis its neighbors; it uses just one isolated aspect of Walt’s theory, i.e. his concept of threat. Hence, the article will only assess the military trends in and intentions of China and North Korea in order to settle whether these countries could be construed as increasingly threatening to Japan. It will focus on three particular years: 1991, 1999, and 2007.15

An alternative to the thesis—or the antithesis—is that changes in Japanese foreign security policy are taking place in a context where China and North Korea are increasingly being framed as “threats” in political discourse, although the military capabilities and intentions of those countries may or may not conform to Walt’s “threat criteria” above. The antithesis builds on scholarship indicating (1) that the aggregate threat against Japan has in fact declined with the demise of the Soviet
Union; and (2) that radical changes in Japanese public attitudes toward foreign security policy are “disproportionate to the threat.”

If Japanese political discourse increasingly presents China and North Korea as existential threats, which require “emergency measures,” and justifies “actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure,” it could be seen as epitomizing a “securitization move.” Now, there is no doubt that the neighboring countries have been highly politicized matters in Japanese public discourse, and Japanese hostility toward China and North Korea has also been well documented in many different sources over the last couple of years. Still, since it is “commonly argued that governmental elites maintain a dominant position when it comes to framing threats,” this article will only investigate whether and how threat images of China and North Korea have changed in Japanese government sources, again comparing materials from 1991, 1999, and 2007.

In the end, the article finds neither completely in favor of the thesis nor totally in support of the antithesis. Or rather, depending on one’s perspective, both could perhaps be seen as validated sufficiently to serve as an explanation of Japan’s changing foreign security policy. The article demonstrates, first, that while Chinese military capability has increased tremendously in the past decade, military developments in North Korea are better characterized as being in a state of stagnation. Moreover, although both actors have behaved aggressively in the past, aggressive intentions vis-à-vis Japan are, to a great extent, absent from both of their respective official discourses. Second, the article shows that, while official Japanese sources have framed North Korea as a security concern of sorts throughout the period under study, China has merely been depicted as “in need of further attention,” even as the country’s military capability has undergone very rapid modernization.

To understand these ambivalent results, the article introduces the idea that a North Korean “threat” might serve as a “perfect excuse” for changing Japanese foreign security policy in the face of what on neorealist terms could be construed as a more pressing Chinese threat. Hence, the article takes two different approaches to understanding China and North Korea as potentially more threatening to Japan, and it tries to make sense of the less than clear-cut results through a synthesis. At the same time, to the extent that the article makes no attempt to establish a causal link between North Korea as a “perfect excuse” and recent changes in Japanese foreign security policy, and also does not go into other possible explanatory factors, these results serve only exploratory purposes.

The next section examines the relative offensive power and intentions of China and North Korea as a way to judge whether it is reasonable to construe these countries as (increasingly) threatening to Japan. The following section examines Japanese government statements as a method for analyzing whether and how China and North Korea are framed as “threats” in official Japanese discourse.

**China and North Korea as threats?**

This section aims to assess the relative strength of Chinese and North Korean offensive power in 1991, 1999, and 2007. Offensive power is operationalized as an aggregate of various military capabilities: military personnel; nuclear weapons and their means of delivery, such as intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and intermediate-range ballistic missiles; submarines, including those with nuclear
weapon-carrying capacity; larger combat ships, such as destroyers and frigates; bomber and fighter aircraft; pilots’ flying hours (when available, an indicator of pilot experience); and, finally, rate of modernization. Thus, in the two final subsections, there is a longitudinal comparison of Beijing’s and Pyongyang’s expressed intentions, as they can be reconstructed through the use of official or semi-official Chinese and North Korean sources, assessing to what extent these intentions could be interpreted as becoming more or less “aggressive.”

**Chinese offensive power 1991–2007**

The Chinese gross domestic product (GDP) almost doubled in nominal terms between 1991 and 1999 (from US$363.77 billion to US$703 billion), and it more than tripled between 1999 and 2007 (to US$2.62 trillion). According to estimates made in *The Military Balance,* the Chinese defense budget of 2007 was also about three times larger than that of 1999 (an increase from US$12.6 billion to US$35.3 billion). Other sources offer estimates that are variously somewhat lower and significantly higher. In line with the gradual transition toward “quality over quantity,” the number of active forces has decreased by 30 percent since 1991 (from 3,030,000 to 2,255,000 people), primarily due to reductions in the People’s Liberation Army. Correspondingly, the number of main battle tanks available to the army has been cut by half (from 15,000 to 7,500), and a multitude of newer models has been introduced, particularly by 2007, providing gradual replacement of the dated Type 59s.

The naval forces have also undergone rapid modernization, with slight increases in the number of ships as well as with certain class upgrades. Particularly noteworthy is the growth of the destroyer fleet by roughly 33 percent between 1999 and 2007 (from 18 to 28). By 2007 China had, for example, acquired modern Russian Sovremenny II Class destroyers. With improved air defense systems they marked a significant upgrade over previous destroyers. The submarine fleet has also made a notable quantity-quality leap through the gradual decommissioning of the Romeo Class submarine, the purchase of eight new Russian Kilo Class attack submarines, and the introduction of two domestically constructed submarine classes—one of which is capable of launching nuclear-armed ballistic missiles.

One of the most dramatic developments is found in the air force. In 1991 China possessed only a modest number of third-generation fighter aircraft (at a time when even North Korea had some fourth-generation fighters). By 1999, however, the air force had been augmented by increasing numbers of J-7s and J-8s, but perhaps mainly through the acquisition of 50 Russian Su-27 fourth-generation fighters. By 2007 the air force had made another qualitative improvement by radically expanding the number of its J-11s (from 2 in 1999 to 116 in 2007)—a domestically produced (and slightly upgraded) version of the Su-27. Ground-attack aircraft capabilities were also augmented by 2007, as Russian Su-30 attack planes had started to replace the dated Q-5s. The relative importance of bomber aircraft appears to have lessened over the years. It is also noteworthy that the number of flying hours has increased year-by-year, particularly for fighter planes; they now match or even exceed those of the Japanese ASDF.

Finally, perhaps the most significant increase in Chinese military power has come in the missile and nuclear forces. A quite dramatic expansion occurred between 1999
and 2007; the number of ICBMs tripled (from 15–20 to 46) while the number of shorter-range ballistic missiles nearly quintupled (from 150 to 725).24

In all, Chinese military development over these 16 years must be seen as highly significant across the board. The defense budget has grown in tandem with GDP, and, while China has faced Western-style drawdowns in personnel, acquisitions of newer equipment and phase-outs of dated equipment have been extensive, particularly since 1999. Of particular interest for Japan is China’s significant growth as a naval power. In recent years it has acquired the means to project power in the East China Sea, challenging Japan in areas where it used to have a technological advantage. The significant expansion of short-range ballistic missiles could similarly be construed as worrisome to Japanese policymakers, considering that Japan is among the most probable potential targets. With this capacity and a growing, well-trained and sophisticated air force, China has enough offensive power to overwhelm the Japanese BMD within a short period of time.

North Korean offensive power 1991–2007

The North Korean experience is largely the opposite of the Chinese one. The North Korean economy has plummeted since it lost the economic support of the Soviet Union after the end of the Cold War; GDP/gross national product (GNP) dropped in nominal terms by 75 percent between 1991 and 1999 (from US$47.9 billion to US$14 billion), and went unlisted in international statistics in 2007. Official defense budget figures have also dropped by more than half (from US$5.23 billion in 1991 to US$2.3 billion in 2007), but it is impossible to verify. The decrease in defense spending has at any rate not noticeably affected the number of North Korean military personnel; well over one million people have been serving in the armed forces throughout the period under study, and there are no signs of a quantity-to-quality transition similar to that in China.

The lack of military modernization is obvious across the board. Tanks, aircraft, and ships have remained essentially unchanged, in both numbers and models. The appalling state of the air force is emphasized by the lack of any significant number of modern fighters (even third-generation fighters are essentially outdated) and by the shortage of flying hours. One rare exception is the domestically produced submarine, believed to be used for special operations.25

At the same time, The Military Balance 1999–2000 noted that North Korea posed a serious concern for the international community through its continuation of a missile program, epitomized by the failed launch of a Taepo-dong-1 missile over the East Sea/Sea of Japan in August 1998 and the development of the longer-range Taepo-dong-2 missiles.26 The Military Balance 2007 suggested, moreover, that regional tensions had increased through the test-firing of ballistic missiles on July 5, 2006 and further through the unsuccessful nuclear test conducted on October 9, 2006.27 Regardless, the much-publicized nuclear weapons program is unlisted in The Military Balance 2007, indicating that North Korea did not possess operational nuclear weapons. Even after the missile and nuclear tests in 2009, that probably has not changed.

One could also question what effect operational North Korean nuclear weapons would have in practice, considering that Japan has had a head start in developing the BMD. The Japanese BMD system has been put through a number of tests—the Standard Missile 3 (SM-3) interceptor has been tested twice (although the second
test in November 2008 was deemed “a failure”) while the patriot advanced capability 3 (PAC-3) system has undergone one test, deemed successful by the Japanese government. Disquieting as it may be for Japanese policymakers to have nuclear weapons in the hands of an erratic totalitarian dictator only 1,289 kilometers (801 miles) from Tokyo, one could at least hypothesize that the largely outdated North Korean missile technology should be no match for the Japan–U.S. BMD when it is fully operational around 2012, should it ever come to that. While the Japanese BMD by no means provides foolproof protection against incoming missiles, it is reassuring that North Korea has not successfully carried out any long-range missile test launch, and even though the second nuclear test on May 25, 2009 was a success, there remains much work to produce a stable nuclear device fit as an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM).

Chinese intentions

“China is committed to peaceful development … China’s development will not affect or threaten any country … It does not seek hegemony … It will never seek hegemony even when it is developed.” So spoke Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao in an interview with the Japanese press in 2007—one of many official statements made in that year to refute international concerns over Chinese military modernization. The editions of China’s National Defense from 1998, 2000, 2006, and 2008 also show striking similarities in emphasizing that the Chinese government’s defense policy is “defensive in nature,” although the two last issues added that it is “purely defensive.”

A remark in China’s National Defense from 1998 that the enlargement of military blocs and the strengthening of military alliances were counterproductive to fostering a peaceful post-Cold War order should likely be seen as careful criticism of NATO enlargement and the Japan–U.S. Joint Declaration on Security in April 1996.

The 2000 edition of China’s National Defense produced criticism of “a certain country” and its development of a theater missile defense, which was said to undermine international efforts toward disarmament. While the target was most certainly the United States and not Japan, it touched upon a subject of concern for both parties. Japan later became the subject of more directly aimed criticism, targeting a “bill relating to measures in the event of a situation in the areas surrounding Japan.” In particular, the revised Japan–U.S. Defense Guidelines legislation of 1999 was criticized for failing “to exclude Taiwan from the scope of ‘the areas surrounding Japan’.” This in turn fuelled Taiwanese “arrogance” and “imperiled the peace and stability of the Asia–Pacific region.” The white paper also argued that the theater missile defense would “far exceed the defensive needs of Japan” and risked triggering a regional arms race.

In contrast, China’s National Defense 2006 described changes in the Japanese posture more neutrally. It duly noted that the Japan–U.S. cooperation was expanding, aiming for greater operational integration; that Japan was seeking to revise its Constitution to allow for collective self-defense; and that the Japanese military posture was becoming more externally oriented. Even so, it only referred to these developments as “growing complexities.” China’s National Defense 2006 moreover suggested that “a small number of countries have stirred up a racket about a ‘China threat,’ and intensified their preventive strategy against China.”

At
a press conference in February 2007, Foreign Ministry Spokesman Qin Gang even specifically targeted Japan as a country that “constantly cries out ‘China Threat’.”

Apart from a passage urging Tokyo to take care of newly discovered chemical weapons abandoned by Japan in China during the war, Japan only figured positively in China’s National Defense 2008. After more than two years of attempts to mend fences at the top political level in Sino-Japanese relations, the white paper listed a number of ways in which “China–Japan defense relations have made headway.”

In summary, this brief overview cannot conclude that official Chinese sources expressed any aggressive intentions toward Japan, either in 1998–2000 or in 2006–08. Beijing has not threatened Japan or in any way implied the possibility of it taking military action directed at the country. That said, however, Beijing has kept ignoring Japanese security concerns. Although this may not make China overtly aggressive, the Chinese lack of military transparency will likely continue to be a source of potentially destabilizing Japanese suspicion.

North Korean intentions
As the most isolated country in the world, North Korean intentions are anyone’s best guess. However, the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)—a North Korean state-operated news agency stationed in Japan—is often treated as Pyongyang’s mouthpiece, and its articles can thus serve to illuminate North Korean government policy.

In most articles referring to Japan, the country is described as posing an immediate political and military threat to North Korea. In 1999, more than 100 articles were published implying that a Japanese military invasion was imminent. For instance, the North Korean missile launch in 1998 was described as a convenient pretext for “reactionaries” of Japan “to step up arms build-up and modernization of armed forces for the purpose of staging a comeback to the Korean peninsula this year.” The Japanese launch of an intelligence-gathering satellite in 1999 was similarly seen as an overture to a pre-emptive strike on North Korea. Many North Korean statements in 1999 undoubtedly sounded aggressive, because the KCNA frequently asserted that a Japanese attack on North Korea would result in the destruction of Japan.

By 2007 the KCNA’s posture had changed somewhat. Although the number of articles that stressed Japan’s imminent plans for “reinvasion” or “expansion overseas” had dropped by half, there was no decrease in the number of articles strongly criticising Japan. The articles that did talk of Japan’s militaristic plans were, moreover, fairly consistent in their language compared to those in 1999, but it is noteworthy that a final-line threat such as “if you invade us we will destroy you” was omitted in many articles in 2007, while it was ubiquitous in 1999. Another dimension of the KCNA’s political delegitimization of Japan was the occasional use of the term “Japs”—commonly considered a racial slur in the West—although, curiously, the term appeared frequently in articles in January 2007, but never appeared again after February. In 2007 there was also a more personalized ridicule of particular politicians, especially then-Prime Minister Shinzō Abe, who was referred to as “a political charlatan and shameless man,” while the Japanese Cabinet as a whole was characterized as “typical of tricksters and hypocrites because it is no more than a group of villains of the 21st century.” The KCNA notably also tried to delegitimize Japan in the realm of the Six-Party Talks—repeating that the
country was unfit to participate because it had sabotaged the deliberations on the nuclear issue by bringing up the North Korean abduction of Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s. The KCNA even suggested that Japan had abducted North Korean citizens.

In sum, although articles in 1999 primarily had a military focus, while those in 2007 had a much more pronounced political focus, the message was essentially the same: North Korea is hostile toward Japan and its “reactionary” leadership. At the same time, it is not clear that North Korean hostility must automatically be interpreted as Pyongyang harboring “aggressive intentions” toward Japan. With a few exceptions in 1999, the North Korean articles were written in a highly defensive manner presupposing that North Korea was the nation under threat and Japan was the aggressive party. At no point did the KCNA advocate a North Korean pre-emptive strike or invasion of Japanese territory, or indeed of the territory of the Republic of Korea (or South Korea). “Retaliation” was the key term, implying that North Korea would remain peaceful as long as it was left alone.

**China and North Korea perceived as “threats”**

This section aims to analyze whether and how China and North Korea have been framed in terms of “threats” in Japanese government documents and statements.

**China “in need of further attention”**

The Japanese *Diplomatic Bluebook 1991*, which covers the first half of the year, referred to China in a largely positive manner—it noted how Chinese diplomacy was now aimed at restoring relations with the world, which had been impaired by the bloodshed at Tiananmen Square in 1989. Largely unconditional praise of China’s “openness policies” followed in the *Diplomatic Bluebook 1992*, which covers the latter half of 1991. Although the *Defense of Japan 1991* observed the PRC efforts to modernize its military, referring to its fairly large defense budget (then at 9 percent of GDP), it not did discuss any potential implications for Japanese security.

The *Diplomatic Bluebook 2000* expanded on the optimistic line, claiming that “The Japan–China relationship is one of the most important bilateral relationships [in the world],” and emphasizing that good relations would affect the peace and prosperity of the whole world. At various press conferences in 1999, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) Press Secretary Sadaaki Numata moreover clearly distanced the Japanese government from various anti-Chinese comments made by Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara, reassuring Beijing that there was no change in Tokyo’s perception of past history, the question of Taiwan, Tibet, or what to call China. The *Defense of Japan 1999* showed somewhat more reserve toward China, stating that the Chinese modernization of nuclear, naval, and air forces (among other things) demanded “continued scrutiny” (*kongo to mo chūmoku shite iku hitsuyō ga aru*), and stressing that Chinese defense publications had thus far “not been satisfactory” (*jibun de wa nai*) in providing concrete figures for equipment levels. Chinese military movements in the Taiwan Strait in the previous years—particularly around the time of the Taiwanese presidential elections in 1996—were also noted with some concern. The *Defense of Japan 1999* further cautioned that China had never ruled out the use of military force to solve the Taiwan problem.
After years of a strained relationship during Jun’ichirō Koizumi’s time as Japanese prime minister (2001–06), in 2007 Sino-Japanese relations were characterized overall by the rhetoric of “ice-breaking,” “ice-melting,” and the building of a “mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests.” Even so, the Diplomatic Bluebook 2008 kept demanding that Beijing ensure the transparency of Chinese military modernization.57 “Grave concern” over particular defense-related matters—above all the Chinese experiment with shooting down a satellite—was also expressed at a MOFA press conference.58 The Defense of Japan 2007 moreover remarked that “it is necessary to analyze carefully how [Chinese military modernization] influences the regional situation and Japan’s national security” (chiiki jijō oyobi waga kuni no anzen hoshō ni ataru eikyō ni tsuite, shincho ni bunseki shite iku hitsuyō ga aru).59 It further stated that the defense budget’s annual growth rate of 10 percent increased the need for transparency.60 There were additional remarks on Chinese oceanographic incursions into the Japanese Exclusive Economic Zone, as well as on the incident when one Chinese nuclear submarine intruded into Japanese territorial waters. The Defense of Japan 2007 moreover cautioned that “attention” should be paid to Chinese maritime activities in the region (chūmoku shite iku hitsuyō ga aru).61

To summarize, the Japanese government has remained highly unwilling to put anything in official print to imply that China poses a threat to Japan, or indeed to anyone.62 Although MOFA has obviously preferred to play the role of optimist in its China policy, by 2007 there were isolated instances of concern being raised over Chinese military modernization and behavior. The tendency toward increasing concern with China is even more marked in the Defense of Japan than in MOFA publications.

North Korea as a “threat”

Compared to the Japanese reluctance to securitize China, official Japanese sources have referred to North Korea in terms of a “threat” or a “grave concern” both more frequently and, moreover, throughout the period under study. According to the Diplomatic Bluebook 1991, Tokyo’s primary concern with North Korean behavior in 1990–91 was the suspicion that the country was developing nuclear weapons. While Pyongyang had suggested that it would complete a safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which was required under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, every step along the way was halted by Pyongyang’s demands for special conditions. MOFA expressed uncertainty as to whether the North Korean leadership was really intent on concluding the agreement, stating that the situation needed to be monitored closely.63 The Diplomatic Bluebook 1992 was noticeably even more concerned with the suspected North Korean nuclear weapons program, calling it “a serious anxiety factor for the security of Japan and the international community” (nihon oyobi kokusai shakai no anzen hoshō ni totte jūyō na kenen zairyō de aru).64 Foreign Minister Michio Watanabe expanded on this position in a speech to the National Diet in early 1992, clearly delineating North Korea as “threatening”: “The question of the development of nuclear weapons by North Korea . . . is a grave situation threatening not only Japan but the peace of the Asia-Pacific region and all the world.” He also strongly demanded that North Korea should “conclude a
Safeguards Agreement with the IAEA and promptly and unconditionally accept IAEA inspections.”

North Korea remained prominent on the political agenda in Diplomatic Bluebook 2000, where it earned itself a full subchapter. Due to the testing of a medium- or long-range ballistic missile—a three-stage version of the dual-staged Taepo-dong-1—in August of the previous year, in 1999 North Korean missiles remained more in focus in Japan than any other issue related to the country. MOFA Press Secretary Numata touched on the topic at various press conferences, stating that another missile launch would be “a matter of very serious concern.” Moreover he quoted then-Prime Minister Keizō Obuchi as calling North Korean missile development “a threat, not only to Japan but also to the Republic of Korea,” and as making clear that another launch would come “with certain disadvantages” for North Korea.67 In the Diplomatic Bluebook 2000 additional concerns were raised over the North Korean spy ship which had trespassed on Japanese territorial waters in March 1999, and regarding the suspicion that there were hidden North Korean nuclear facilities.68 The Defense of Japan 1999 similarly declared that through its nuclear and missile programs North Korea “increases military tension on the Korean peninsula, [and] is becoming a seriously destabilizing element for the security of the entire East Asian region, including Japan” (chōsen hantō no gunjiteki kinchō o takamete ore, nihon o fukumu higashi ajia zen’iki no anzen hoshō ni totte jūyō na fuantei yōin to natte iru).69 The white paper criticized Pyongyang for its aggressive behavior, referring to numerous North Korean incursions into South Korean waters and territory over the past few years, in several cases leading to skirmishes.

The Diplomatic Bluebook 2008 was somewhat more lackluster in terms of its language regarding North Korea, just expressing concern about the “unpredictable” (yodan o yurusanai) situation and the lack of cooperation from the North Korean side.70 While detailing the nuclear, missile, and abduction issues it did not expand on their effect on Japanese security. Although the North Korean development of missiles continued to be defined as a “grave concern” at MOFA press conferences in 2007,71 the press secretary put much heavier emphasis on the abduction issue than in 1999.72 The Defense of Japan 2007 was more security-oriented in emphasizing that North Korean behavior destabilizes the entire region and that the North Korean nuclear issue “is a problem that exerts a serious influence on Japan’s national security” (waga kuni no anzen hoshō ni eikyo o oyobasu mondai de aru). From the viewpoint of non-proliferation, moreover, it “is also a serious problem for the entire international community” (kokusai shakai zentai ni totte mo juyō na mondai de aru).73 The Ministry of Defense (MoD) once again criticized North Korea for its incursions into South Korean territory and waters as well as operations in Japanese waters.74

In sum, Japanese government sources have delineated North Korea as a “threat” or a “grave concern” throughout the period under study. Whereas these sources have consistently striven to politicize the North Korean nuclear program, this issue was partly overshadowed by the missile issue in 1999 and by the abduction issue in 2007.

**Conclusion and implications**

The contrast between official Japanese attitudes toward China and toward North Korea is remarkable. A Japanese opinion poll in 2007 moreover shows that public
attitudes in that year closely matched the official attitudes: 81.4 percent of the Japanese respondents marked North Korea as a military threat to Japan, while China came second with 35.4 percent of the respondents. Although China is not nearly as powerful militarily as the Soviet Union was during the Cold War, and although the Japanese military budget was still somewhat bigger than the Chinese one in 2007, by neorealist reasoning the Japanese government and public should have every reason to worry about China’s continuously growing military power.

Certainly, Tokyo has kept to the formula that further “attention” should be paid to this development. Judging from Japanese statements, however, the problem is not so much the military modernization itself, but rather the lack of transparency in that process. Although “attention” and “concern” could very well be interpreted as Orwellian “newspeak” for “threat,” it must still be concluded that Japanese sources have not framed China even as a “concern” in a way that corresponds to the tremendous increase in Chinese military power.

One has to ask why Japanese sources have played down Chinese military developments and preferred instead to emphasize Chinese economic developments. This seeming paradox could perhaps be resolved with the help of Walt’s notion that “aggressive intentions” equal or override capabilities when estimating “threats.”

Still, if Tokyo were completely convinced of the benign nature of China’s rise, it would not make much sense to complain about Beijing’s lack of military transparency. There would also be little reason for Japan to modernize its own military forces beyond what is needed for protection against North Korean missiles. At the same time, if China’s rise is inevitable, then it does make sense to strive for cordial relations with the powerful neighbor and not rely completely on a partner half a world away, which may or may not stay committed to the protection of Japan.

North Korea is a rather different case. On the one hand it has barely developed its military at all over the past 16 years: numbers and models have remained essentially the same. Considering that the neighboring countries have modernized and improved their military equipments, North Korea has rather been weakened in relative terms over this period. North Korean attitudes toward Japan have also remained similar; hostile, haughty and derogatory, but hardly aggressive in the expansionist sense. As for the Japanese side of the coin, Tokyo has evidently expressed very strong concern over North Korea throughout the period under investigation.

The North Korean missile and nuclear programs—the major exceptions to Pyongyang’s lack of military development—probably explains why the country has been consistently framed in terms of a “threat.” Tokyo is evidently much concerned about these issues. However, if a neighboring country’s mere possession of ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons would automatically trigger Japan to frame it as a “threat,” then China should have had the same treatment long ago. It possesses hundreds of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles and, unlike North Korea as of 2007, and even after the tests in 2009, it keeps these capabilities fully operational. It is moreover questionable how effective even more advanced North Korean nuclear and missile technology would be against a sophisticated Japan–U.S. Ballistic Missile Defense.

Of course, Tokyo’s particular aversion toward North Korea could be explained by the fact that Pyongyang does not have the most responsible record: the Rangoon Bombing in 1983; the Korean Air Flight 858 bombing in 1987; the abduction of Japanese (and South Korean) citizens in the 1970s and 1980s; constantly provocative
behavior toward South Korea along the demilitarized zone (DMZ); and the less-than-charming descriptions of Japanese policymakers in KCNA articles—all these give every reason to question Pyongyang’s intentions. The 1998 ballistic missile launch over Japanese territory was also as close to a military assault as one can get without actually committing one and it was obviously interpreted as an aggressive act by the Japanese government. The nuclear test in 2006 was moreover conducted in the face of global opposition.

Still, did China not attack the UN forces during the Korean War; conquer Tibet in the 1950s; use weapons to crush a peaceful demonstration in 1989; carry out massive nuclear weapons tests and provocations near Taiwan in 1995–96; and perform a radical military build-up after 1999 while trying to delegitimize the concerns of neighboring countries? Just as the possession of nuclear weapons alone does not explain why certain countries are framed as “threats,” it is apparent that neither does past aggressive behavior.

The results of this article in a sense validate both the thesis and the antithesis. From the point of view of the thesis, China’s dramatic military modernization alone could be seen as providing an explanation of Japanese “normalization,” probably even without any clear evidence of aggressive Chinese intentions. However, from the point of view of the antithesis, the consistent framing of North Korea in terms of a “threat” seems the more likely explanation. In a related manner, despite his relative youth and inexperience, Shinzo Abe was elected president of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Japanese prime minister in 2006 largely due to his favoring hard-line policies toward North Korea.

Since the results of the preceding analysis are thus highly ambivalent, it seems more reasonable to argue in favor of a synthesis. In other words, the findings of this article give reason to wonder whether North Korea does not provide a handy pretext, or a “perfect excuse,” for a Japanese military “normalization” which by neorealist reasoning should be aimed toward China. Apart from BMD, Japanese military developments are of a kind and a magnitude that would not be necessary even if North Korea possessed a limited number of operational nuclear weapons.

The idea that North Korea serves as a “perfect excuse” for changing Japanese foreign security policy has an economic and a military–political dimension. The economic dimension relates to the fact that Sino-Japanese trade is extensive and important to both sides. In 2006, bilateral trade (excluding trade with Hong Kong) reached a value of US$211.3 billion and Japanese outward investments in China amounted to US$6.2 billion (according to Japanese statistics; US$4.6 billion according to Chinese sources) in the same year. Extensive trade requires extensive trust, and crucial actors in both countries would have much to lose if this apparently functional and profitable arrangement were to be derailed due to political disagreements and concerns. The military–political dimension relates to regional influence. China’s military development since 1991 has doubtlessly upset the previous balance of power, and the status of “regional great power” has gradually transferred from Japan to China. Although Tokyo has been trying its best to resist this transformation by adopting a more “normal” foreign security policy, at the same time it has wished to avoid getting enmeshed in military rivalry with China. Blaming everything on North Korea has undoubtedly offered certain advantages for Tokyo. In this way it has been able to uphold and continue to strengthen its military posture while continuing to benefit from a highly profitable economic relationship with China.
One rather ironic implication of the preceding analysis is thus that North Korea could be seen as contributing to short-term regional security and stability by shifting the focus away from Sino-Japanese disagreements. The North Korean nuclear test in October 2006 was for example very timely in this regard, because it happened just as newly elected Prime Minister Abe visited China and South Korea on a trip to mend ties after five long years of bilateral tension. The Six-Party Talks on the North Korean nuclear issue have similarly provided Japanese and Chinese policymakers—as well as those from the United States, Russia, and the two Koreas—with a forum for discussion of common security problems.

It is thus not only possible to construe North Korea as a “perfect excuse” for changing Japanese foreign security policy. Since it is theoretically conceivable in this day and age that Japan and China could be locked in military rivalry for influence in East Asia, one could even speculate that North Korea serves to increase regional stability as a whole by playing the “bad guy.” With acts such as the recent missile and nuclear tests, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that it might very well continue to provide a common focus for constructive dialogue between Japan and China, and in the region at large.

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Notes


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6. For a thorough assessment of change in Japanese foreign security policy, see Hagström and Williams, “Remilitarization, Really?”


12. Walt, The Origin of Alliances, 23. Of course, certain states—the United States in particular—have the logistical means to project power across the globe, regardless of physical distance.

13. Ibid., 24. Since military and logistical capabilities for long-distance campaigns are both aspects of “offensive power,” this criterion relates closely to the first two criteria and in a sense makes them superfluous.
15. These three years were selected for representing relative calm in the international relations of Northeast Asia, at least compared to the disturbed state of regional affairs caused by the killings at Tiananmen Square (1989); by the first North Korean nuclear crisis (1992–94); by the Chinese nuclear weapons testing (1995); by the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis and the Japan–U.S. Joint Declaration on Security (1996); by the firing of a North Korean missile over Japanese airspace (1998); and by the icy relations between China and Japan (2001–2006). In 2006, moreover, the regional order was greatly upset by the North Korean testing of missiles and nuclear weapons. Although no year is completely eventless, and although policies during “calmer” years are bound to be affected by experiences from previous years, selecting less eventful years does help to avoid any distortion by unusually dramatic and unrepresentative foreign policies caused by “spur of the moment” reactions. Moreover, taking three years with a consistent time gap of eight years has the advantage that it highlights policy differences over time.


21. For statements representing the Chinese position, the editions of China’s National Defense of 1998, 2000, 2006, and 2008 have been used. Unfortunately the Chinese Ministry of Defense did not produce this publication prior to 1998, making the period 1991–99 more difficult to assess than 1999–2007. As this is a bi-annual publication it was also not possible to target 1999 and 2007.


34. Government of the PRC, China’s National Defense 2000, Chapter I.

35. Ibid., Chapter V.


38. Government of the PRC, China’s National Defense 2008, Chapters XIII and XIV.


50. Here we probably disagree with Hughes, “Why Japan Will Not Go Nuclear (Yet),” 71.


56. Japan’s Defense Agency, *Bōei hakusho 1999* [Defense of Japan 1999], Chapter 1, Section 3.4.3.
58. See, for example, Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Press Conference,” February 16, 2007.
60. Ibid., 49–50.
61. Ibid., 55.
62. However, in December 2005, then-Foreign Minister Taro Asō went so far as to call China “a considerable threat.” This was later denied in a written statement, but Asō repeated his assessment in April of the following year; see Kanako Takahara, “China Posing a Threat: Aso,” *Japan Times Online*, December 23, 2005; Reiji Yoshida, “It’s Official: China Not a Threat,” *Japan Times Online*, February 1, 2006; “Aso Says China a Threat; Shrine Overtures Rebuffed,” *Japan Times Online*, April 3, 2006. Articles in the *Japan Times* are available at http://www.japantimes.co.jp/.
63. Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Gaikō seicho 1991*, Chapter 4, Section 2.3.
74. Ibid., 38.
78. On the fear of U.S. abandonment of Japan, see, for example, Samuels, “Japan’s Goldilocks Strategy,” 114; Hughes, “North Korea’s Nuclear Weapons,” 80–1; 89–90.
79. “Saikin no nicchū kankei to chūgoku jijō” [Recent Japan–China relations and the Chinese situation], Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China Division, November 2007; and “Chūgoku no keizai jijō to Nicchū keizai kankei” [The Chinese economic situation and
Japan–China economic relations], Japan External Trade Organization, China and North Asia Division, October 2007.

80. Yoichi Funabashi, “Keeping Up With Asia: America and the New Balance of Power,” *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 5 (September/October 2008): 111. At the time of writing in May 2009, however, the Six-Party Talks were deadlocked.

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