

Japan's Snap Elections and Prime Minister Abe's Hawkish Strategy toward North Korea

Abe Pulls It Off, But It Will End in Tears. Abe Shinzo's victory in the election will only propel Japan down the dead end road of remilitarization

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Snap election – harnessing hysteria, diverting attention

Japanese Prime Minister's [gamble](#) in calling a snap election to harness anxiety and hysteria over the much-publicized 'threat from North Korea' has succeeded, as it was widely predicted. The political achievement is considerable. Only a couple of months back, things were [not looking good for](#) Abe and his Liberal Democratic Party. The New York Times described the '[Abe conundrum](#)':

Mr. Abe's public approval ratings dipped below 30 percent over the summer as he was dogged by a series of scandals, and opinion polls taken during the campaign found that more voters disapproved of Mr. Abe's hawkish strategy toward North Korea than approved of it.

"There is an Abe conundrum," Professor Kingston [the director of Asian studies at Temple University in Tokyo] said. "How does a guy who is basically unpopular with voters, whose policies are not particularly popular, who doesn't get high marks for leadership, and yet he keeps winning in elections?"

He had a little bit of luck – a typhoon kept some voters away, and the opposition was fractured– but his winning card was the [hysteria](#) over North Korea after the recent tests of the Hwasong-12 missile that overflowed Japan. Electors might not have approved of Abe's North Korea policy or his plans for remilitarization, but it appears that he frightened a sufficient number.

The Japanese government and the media made a big fuss over the Hwasong-12 tests of 28 August and 15 September. They were portrayed as a deliberate threat to Japan, and the authorities heightened the hysteria [by sending emergency alerts through cellphones and over loudspeakers](#).

Presumed flight path of Hwasong-12 on 28 August 2017



The reality was that the tests were actually about developing a deterrent against the US and

the flight over Japan was primarily a matter of geography. If North Korea is to test a long-range missile on a standard (rather than lofted) trajectory that will end up in the unpopulated northern Pacific, then it has to go over Japan. [David Wright](#) of the Union of Concerned Scientists explained:

Yesterday's launch was the first time North Korea flew a ballistic missile over Japanese territory, although in 1998 and 2009 it launched rockets that overflowed Japan on failed attempts to put satellites into orbit. It has gone to some lengths to avoid flying over Japan, by launching its missile tests on highly lofted trajectories so they will land in the Sea of Japan. In addition, it has directed its more recent satellite launches to the south, even though it is preferable to launch to the east—over Japan—since it allows the rocket to gain speed from the rotation of the earth.

After its threats of firing Hwasong-12 missiles near Guam, it is interesting that North Korea fired this missile to the east rather than in the direction of Guam, which might have been interpreted as an attack despite the short range. The missile also appears to have flown in a direction that did not pass over highly populated parts of Japan.

As the picture shows, it appears that the missile was routed over the Straits of Tsugaru between Honshu and Hokkaido, and the second missile is thought to have done the same. Both were well above Japanese airspace, higher than many satellites, when they passed over Japanese territory. Basically, long range missiles are designed for distant targets, so neither IRBMs such as Hwasong-12 nor ICBMs, such as Hwasong-14, pose any particular danger to Japan.

But perceptions count more than reality, and Abe swept to victory and towards a renewed drive for constitutional revision and remilitarization:

[Reuters](#): Abe to push reform of Japan's pacifist constitution after election win

[Washington Post](#): Abe retains supermajority in Japan's election, may push to amend constitution

[The Independent](#): Japan election results: Shinzo Abe scores major victory for ruling coalition and pledges to reform pacifist constitution

And that is bad news – for Japan and for the region.

Abe family tree — Kishi Nobusuke, 'America's favorite war criminal'

Political dexterity runs in Abe's family. Politics at the top is his natural habitat: 'Abe hails from one of Japan's most famous [political dynasties](#): his father and grandfather both held top jobs.' Both grandfathers did, in fact, but it is the maternal one, [Kishi](#) Nobusuke, that is the one to note. Kishi was one of the architects of Japan's war against China in the 1930s and 1940s, which led to the Pacific War against the US, various European countries and finally the Soviet Union. He was particularly notorious for his [governing](#) of the puppet state of Manchukuo (Manchuria or currently Northeastern provinces of China) where he was known as 昭和の怪物 ('the Shōwa era monster/devil'). One of his underlings in Manchukuo was none other than Park Chung-hee, who served in the [puppet army](#) hunting down resisters to Japanese rule, Chinese and Korean; one of the latter was Kim Il Sung though their paths did

not cross.

He was arraigned as a Class A war criminal by the Americans after the war and held for three years. But times changed; friends became enemies, and enemies became friends. The US was in the process of 'losing China,' and Kishi's killing of Chinese was transformed from an outrageous slaughter of gallant allies to a rather prescient act of defending America against the Red Chinese. Kishi became, in Michael Schaller's words, [America's Favorite War Criminal](#). Given President Trump's predilection for golf, it is interesting to note how Kishi used the sport in his political career. He had developed a friendship with pre-war US ambassador to Japan, Joseph C. Grew. When Grew was held under detention after Pearl Harbor, Kishi arranged for him to be allowed out for a round of golf. The favor was reciprocated when Kishi visited the US in 1957 to arrange some funding from the CIA and played golf with President Eisenhower at an otherwise racially-segregated golf club. By that time, Kishi was Prime Minister, a position he owed to a lobby that included amongst its members, former Ambassador Grew. This lobby was instrumental in overturning America's war aim of creating a deindustrialized, demilitarized Japan in favor of remilitarization and reindustrialization to counter the Soviet Union and China. That is Abe's pedigree, and that is how he and remilitarization fit in with US strategy to preserve and expand hegemony.

However, history can leave unwelcome legacies behind, and one of those, from Abe's perspective, is Japan's 'Peace Constitution,' in particular its [Article Nine](#):

1. *Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes.*
2. *In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.*

Although details of its provenance are disputed, it is generally considered that it was basically drafted by [Americans](#) in the staff of General MacArthur, the Supreme Commander for Allied Powers, or SCAP. Militarism had brought Japan to devastating defeat in 1945 – counting not merely the casualties of the [atomic bombs and the fire bombings](#) of Japanese cities but also the millions of soldiers and civilians evicted from liberated colonies (such as Korea)–that the ideals of peace and the renunciation of war had widespread popular support in Japan then as they do now. Not everyone saw it in this light of course–not the Kishi's and the Abe's nor the US strategists who wanted to harness Japan's military potential against the Soviet Union and China. Fortunately for them, god created lawyers, who argued that Article Nine did not really mean what it seemed to mean to the untutored eye. To start with, the 'land, sea and air forces' that were 'never to be maintained' were renamed; the Japanese Imperial Army and its constituents became the Japanese Self Defense Forces. This process, called '[reinterpretation](#),' alternates with another–constitution revision. In other words, you either change the words or change the meaning of the words, and this has been the dominant trend, because it encounters less opposition. Thus, Abe has maintained for some years that the [Constitution](#) does not stop Japan from acquiring nuclear arms. Moreover, he argues, increased military expenditure and military operations overseas are nothing to do with 'right of belligerency' forbidden by Article Nine but rather an example of '[proactive pacifism](#).' And that is not a misprint.

[The New York Times on Abe's 'Proactive Pacifism'](#)



The 'North Korean Threat' as a facilitator of Japanese remilitarization

The much-publicized 'North Korean threat' and, in a slightly different way, the 'Chinese threat' offer an obvious and, at first sight, seemingly heaven-sent justification for Japanese remilitarization. Even [proponents](#) admit that 'The Japanese public, which remains apprehensive of even minimal use of force, is another constraining factor [to remilitarization].' These threats in fact are not heaven-sent but, in their different ways, largely constructed to serve the purpose.

Both are built on a bedrock of racism. Colonialism/imperialism and racism go hand in hand and feed on each other. We rule over a foreign people, because we believe they are inferior, perhaps even sub-human, and our rule over them proves that we are superior. The Korean peninsula and much of China were part of the Japanese empire, and because the past has not been exorcised in the way it was, to quite an extent, in Germany, these attitudes pollute the present. Japan is not alone in this, and we can see variants around the world, in the US, Britain, and wherever there is a present or past colonial relationship. One important aspect of racism is that it distorts and degrades people's ability to think rationally and realistically about others. By ascribing irrationality – essentially non-human behavior – to others, it leads to a false, if comforting, perception of the situation. The racist becomes a victim of delusion. It gives rise, for instance, to Donald Trump's [assertion](#) that 'Rocket Man [Kim Jong Un] is on a suicide mission for himself and for his regime.' You can only believe such nonsense by abandoning rationality and embracing fantasy, something to which it is alleged that Trump is prone.

On the elite level, these antagonisms towards North Korea and China are exacerbated by chagrin. A century ago, Japan lorded over both. Now Japan is still, as Gavan McCormack puts it, a [client state](#) of the US, but China is economically and militarily larger than Japan and a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Even North Korea, while much smaller and poorer, is an independent state. No foreign generals, American or Chinese, there to give 'guidance.'

Clearly, China is a competitor to Japan in many ways, and it does possess substantial and growing military power. China could, perhaps, pose a threat to Japan in the future. North Korea is clearly different. It has a population 1/5 of Japan's and an economy much smaller. And despite Japan's peace constitution, its military budget in 2016, according to the [International Institute for Strategic Studies](#), was \$47 billion. That is about 13 times that of North Korea if we use [State Department](#) figures, and 50 times if we use an estimate quoted in the South Korean [National Assembly](#) in 2013. North Korea has not the ability to attack Japan nor reason to do so, and does not appear to ever have threatened it. The danger for Japan is that if the US attacks North Korea, then as the country hosting the main forward US bases in Asia, it will become a target of Korean retaliation. Exactly what that would entail is unknown, but for what it is worth, a recent [estimate](#) put the possible numbers of dead in a nuclear attack on Seoul and Tokyo at up to 3.8 million.

Mr. Abe seems to think such dangers are worthwhile in his pursuit of remilitarization, but it should be remembered that none of this is inevitable. Japan could have turned to a neutralist path in the 1950s (which is why the CIA channeled funds to Kishi Nobusuke) and back in September 2002 when Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi went to Pyongyang. The resulting [Japan – DPRK Pyongyang Declaration](#) promised all sorts of good things, but little

has come to [pass](#). It appears that the George W. Bush administration was very concerned that a Tokyo-Pyongyang rapprochement would upend its strategy in East Asia and took steps to prevent peace from breaking out. The Agreed Framework signed by the Clinton administration was [scuttled](#), and pressure was put on the Japanese. The very emotional but highly [suspicious](#) issue of abductees still continues to bedevil relations despite further negotiations between Pyongyang and Tokyo; perhaps the matter is too much of a crowd-pleaser for Japanese politicians to resolve it. American hostility to detente between Japan and North Korea—as part of its strategy to contain China and strengthen Japan’s client relationship (‘the [US-Japan alliance](#)’)—and the populist advantages to Japanese politicians of inciting anti-North Korean—or perhaps just anti-Korean—feelings together suggest that the pious hopes of Japanese liberals that relations will be [normalized](#) will be thwarted for the immediate future at least.

The dead end road of Japanese remilitarization

Remilitarization is clearly a response to Japan’s client state relationship with the US. The Peace Constitution came about as a result of Japan’s defeat, primarily but not exclusively by the United States. One way to exorcise that defeat and its consequences would be to attempt to return to the status quo ante 1945 and become a ‘normal country’ with the same rights to belligerency as the victor nations (and even Germany). This is understandable, but it is taking the wrong direction. Militarism wreaked terrible damage on Japan and its neighbors, and it is that which should be recognized and renounced. To be fair, this is difficult in a world suffused with hypocrisy and double standards; why should the defeated do things that the victors do not. When has the United States, to take the leading example, apologized for its history and renounced belligerency? Besides this difficult ethical issue, however, there are practical reasons why Japan should not remilitarize but rather forge a [path as a pioneer](#) of a primarily pacifist country where soft power replaces hard power.

Firstly, Japanese remilitarization is gestating within the womb of American strategy in East Asia, which focuses primarily, but not exclusively, on the containment and possible dismemberment of China. If the US goes to war against China, most probably through an attack on North Korea, Japan will almost certainly be drawn in. The consequences would be disastrous for Japan and less severe for the US unless there is an all-out nuclear exchange, and if there were victory over China, the benefits would accrue to the US and not Japan. If there were booty, it is unlikely that the US would share it.

Secondly, ethical considerations and long-term consequences for humanity aside, military power may *make sense* for some countries and not others. It makes sense for countries such as North Korea or China that are threatened by far more powerful adversaries, as a deterrent. It also makes sense for the US, which has a global empire to maintain. It does not make much sense for, say the Netherlands or New Zealand, which face no credible enemies, even less so for Britain where it encourages dangerous [imperial nostalgia](#), and it does not make sense for Japan. Even without a formal US-Japan alliance (the client relationship), the US would not tolerate an attack on Japan by North Korea or China for pragmatic balance of power reasons.

The question of ‘military power making sense’ takes place within history; sometimes it makes sense, and at other times it does not. Take Japan for the three quarters of a century after the Meiji Restoration of 1868. At that time, empires were all the rage, and if you didn’t have one you would almost certainly end up as part of somebody else’s. The British had one, as did the French, the Dutch, and the Russians. Germany was trying to get into the act,

as was the United States, which introduced a new style of imperialism, partly based on compellence and threat (what is often misleadingly called 'diplomacy') but also by ruthless armed force, as in the [Philippines](#). In these circumstances, it made sense for Japan, too, to carve itself out an empire.

The Japanese and American empires had two major intersections. The second was at Pearl Harbor in 1941, but that had been preceded by the Taft-Katsura Agreement of 1905, which, in the words of [Bruce Cumings](#), 'acknowledged a trade-off between the Philippines and Korea: Japan would not question American rights in its colony and the United States would not challenge Japan's new protectorate.' Neither Taft nor Katsura could know that 40 years later the US would own all of Japan and half of Korea.

Japan's annexation of Korea, its puppet rule over Manchuria and its earlier seizure of Taiwan in 1895 all made economic sense. The colonies provided raw materials, closed markets, labor and a place for Japan's surplus population and something probably unique to Japan whereby parts of the empire became a blueprint for the future: 'The planners at [the South Manchurian Railroad Research Department](#), for example, called for an ultra-modern economy in the colonies in order to transcend what they saw as the deeply flawed economy of the homeland.' Those times are over and cannot be recaptured.

Contemporary Japan lies between two behemoths – rising China and declining America. There are no great [technological impediments](#) to Japan becoming a major military power with the full range of assets, including [nuclear weapons](#) and delivery systems. But what could be done with that military might? China is too big and strong; there can be no more seizures of Taiwan or Manchuria. The US encourages Japanese remilitarization, because it is confident that Japan is a tamed beast that can be used against China. But as Palmerston pointed out back in the 19th century, countries do not have permanent friends and enemies, only permanent interests. Japan and the US could fall out, and Japan might desire to exclude the US from Asia as it tried to do in 1941. But that would be a ridiculous dream.

In the short term, Japanese remilitarization exacerbates danger in Northeast Asia. It feeds on crisis on the Korean peninsula and the region to provide it with a proclaimed justification. It enhances US intransigence towards North Korea and makes a peaceful settlement less likely. It sees a war in Korea as an opportunity to [intervene](#), thereby breaking free of the constraints against foreign military adventures.

But in the long term, remilitarization leads to a dead end, both for Japan and the region. It offers no prospects nor hope for prosperity or security.

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