

The Current Situation and Future Prospects for Japan's Northeast Asia Policy vis-à-vis the Changes in the Situation on the Korean Peninsula

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2018 was the first year in which Kim Jong Un, the Supreme Leader of the DPRK, held summit meetings. There were no less than eight of them. Three ROK–DPRK summits, three China–DPRK summits, one US–DPRK summit, and one Cuba–DPRK summit were held.

As the impact of this first year of Kim Jong Un's summits was strong, the impression was that there were great changes in the DPRK in 2018. However, considered in historical terms, with the exception of the United States, the other countries were only ones with which the DPRK's successive supreme leaders had held summits.

For that reason there was no great change in the diplomatic policy of the Workers' Party of Korea with the China–DPRK summits and the Cuba–DPRK summit. Both nations are intrinsically allies and nations friendly with the DPRK.

Moreover, at the ROK–DPRK summits, two “joint declarations” and the “military agreement for the implementation of the Panmunjom Declaration” were signed, but it would be difficult to call them things which changed the confrontation on the Korean Peninsula. To begin with, because the United States and not the ROK is the most serious opponent for the DPRK, a rapprochement with the ROK alone would not dispel the sense of crisis in the security of the DPRK.

Nothing concrete was decided at the first-ever US–DPRK summit. In addition, the subsequent working-level talks have not made progress. It cannot be said that the situation on the Korean Peninsula has changed in terms of structure due to the US–DPRK summit.

In other words, the changes in the situation on the Korean Peninsula in 2018 are strong in impact, but it would be difficult to call them structural. Therefore, the changes in the situation on the Korean Peninsula have not brought about great change in Japan's Northeast Asia policy.

Moreover, Japan's diplomacy does not look only at Northeast Asia. In “Japan's Foreign Policy that Takes a Panoramic Perspective of the World Map” which was commenced by the second Abe Cabinet, they promoted the following as priority areas: “1) Strengthening the Japan–US Alliance and Promote the Networking of Allies and Friendly Nations”; “2) Enhancing Relations with Neighboring Countries”; “3) Promoting Economic Diplomacy”; “4) Response to Global Issues”; “5) Contributing to the Peace and Stability of the Middle East”; and “6) Promoting the ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy’”. Japan's Northeast Asia policy concerns “2) Enhancing Relations with Neighboring Countries”. In addition, most important within “2) Enhancing Relations with Neighboring Countries” is clearly diplomacy with China, and not that with the Korean Peninsula.

If the changes in the situation on the Korean Peninsula were to have a great impact on Japan's Northeast Asia policy, then it would be the worsening of relations with the ROK. However, the conflict between Japan and the ROK is structural, and the changes in the situation on the Korean Peninsula in 2018 are nothing more than promotional factors. Furthermore, if the rapprochement between the United States and the DPRK were to progress and denuclearization work proceed, then it would still be difficult to hope that there may be change in Japan's DPRK policy.

[Translated by ERINA]