



Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Engagement or
Confrontation? Japan's
Strategic Dilemma in Dealing
with North Korea*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speaker :

Debendra Sahu

12 March 2025

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Speaker: Dr. Debendra Sahu, Assistant Professor, Japanese Studies, O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat.

Chair: Prof. Srabani Roy Choudhury, Professor, Japanese Studies, Centre for East Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Date: 12 March 2025

Venue: Zoom Webinar

- The seminar explored the complex and historically turbulent relationship between Japan and North Korea. The speaker emphasised that Japan needs to strike a balance between engagement and confrontation, while addressing domestic pressures and regional security concerns, particularly in light of North Korea's recent actions, including cyber activities and its involvement in the Ukraine conflict.
- The speaker also explored Japan's complex geopolitical situation concerning North Korea, especially in the context of Donald Trump's return to the White House for a second term. This development adds a new dimension to the already delicate relationship between the two nations.
- Dr. Sahu delved into the range of interactions that have characterised Japan–North Korea relations over the years, from initial efforts to establish diplomatic ties to instances of military confrontation. Highlighting the persistent tensions, the speaker also discussed Japan's previous, largely unsuccessful attempts at diplomatic engagement, including participation in international summits, and various outreach efforts that were unsuccessful at ensuring lasting progress. Furthermore, such efforts have also been hampered due to economic sanctions against North Korea.
- Dr. Sahu noted that Donald Trump's overtures toward North Korea during his first term set a precedent, and have served to intensify Japan's current security concerns. While Trump's efforts aimed at de-escalation, they often sidelined Japan, leaving it more vulnerable in a rapidly shifting regional landscape.

- The speaker argued that Japan's colonial legacy is a major obstacle to engagement with North Korea, and that it continues to fuel resentment on both sides of the De-militarised Zone (DMZ). This historical legacy complicates any diplomatic initiatives and hampers confidence-building. As a result there has been only one major diplomatic milestone between Japan and North Korea when Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro met Kim Jong-Il in 2002.
- Differing political ideologies further complicate normalisation efforts, as illustrated by failed negotiations between Japan and North Korea regarding economic assistance in the postwar period. The speaker emphasised the intricacies of Japan's strategic dilemma in engaging with North Korea while navigating these multifaceted challenges.
- Dr. Sahu highlighted the significance of the 2002 "Pyongyang Declaration", wherein Japan expressed remorse for the historical suffering it had inflicted. The Declaration also laid out commitments for future economic cooperation with North Korea. This was seen as a potential turning point in bilateral relations, however, Japan has consistently framed any financial commitments not as direct reparations but as "economic assistance". This choice of language has often been perceived as evasive, undermining trust and complicating efforts to reconcile historical grievances.
- Despite these obstacles, channels of communication have continued to exist, largely through the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan, or Chongryon. This organisation facilitated informal interactions including trade and transportation until sanctions were imposed in 2006.
- In conclusion, the speaker emphasised that Japan must navigate a delicate balance, while addressing its own security concerns without undermining American interests in the region. The potential for effectively pressuring North Korea remains uncertain, given the regime's unpredictability and resistance to past diplomatic efforts. Japan's apprehensions are further heightened by the evolving geopolitical landscape, which could shift significantly depending on the policies of the new US leadership. These developments underscore the challenges Japan faces as it seeks to ensure national security while engaging with both regional and global powers.

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