



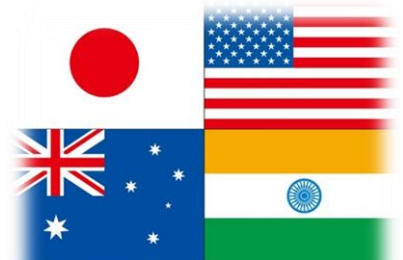
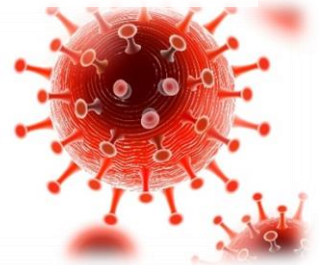
Top 10 Risks Threaten a Peace in Northeast Asia

February, 2021

195 foreign policy and security experts from Japan, US, China, and the Republic of Korea graded



COVID-19
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言論
NPO

The Genron NPO



North Korean nuclear issue and US-China conflict **greatest risks to peace in Northeast Asia in 2021**

In line with the Asia Peace Conference held on 24 February 2021, The Genron NPO surveyed the opinions of 195 diplomatic and national security experts from four countries – Japan, the United States, China, and the Republic of Korea. Based on their scoring of various issues facing the region, we were able to create a list of the top ten risks threatening peace in Northeast Asia in 2021.

According to the experts we surveyed, the number one risk threatening peace in the region in 2021 is North Korea's status as a nuclear power. The experts see high risk in the relationship between China and the US, as the next highly-ranked risks were the current US-China animosity, the power struggle occurring in the digital realm, and territorial land and water conflict in the South China Sea.

Top 10 Risks Threaten a Peace in Northeast Asia		Points
		(0-6)
1	North Korea's existence as a nuclear power	4.17
2	The US-China conflict & the struggle for control over the digital realm	3.88
3	Conflict over territorial land and waters in the South China Sea	3.70
4	China's expanding influence in Asia	3.53
5	Accidental clashes and other incidents in the Taiwan Strait	3.30
6	The legitimacy to apply Chinese Coast Guard Law and its conduct challenging the status quo	3.23
7	The tension between the major powers regarding the new domain such as cyber and space	3.19
8	Economic damage and increasing debt in Asian countries caused by COVID-19 pandemic	3.16
9	The tension between China and the Quad in Indo-Pacific	3.07
10	The uncertain end of the COVID pandemic	2.94
11	Climate change and global warming	2.91

In order to create the survey, Genron distributed a questionnaire to 2,000 academics that work with us. After receiving 115 responses, we selected 19 of the answers provided about threats to peace in Northeast Asia in 2021. We then asked 195 diplomatic and national security experts in Japan, the US, China, and South Korea to score each one on i) impact on peace in Northeast Asia and level of severity (with three points being the maximum score) and ii) in terms of the how possible it is that the issue will flare up and cause real damage in 2021 (also out of three points, for a total score of six points).

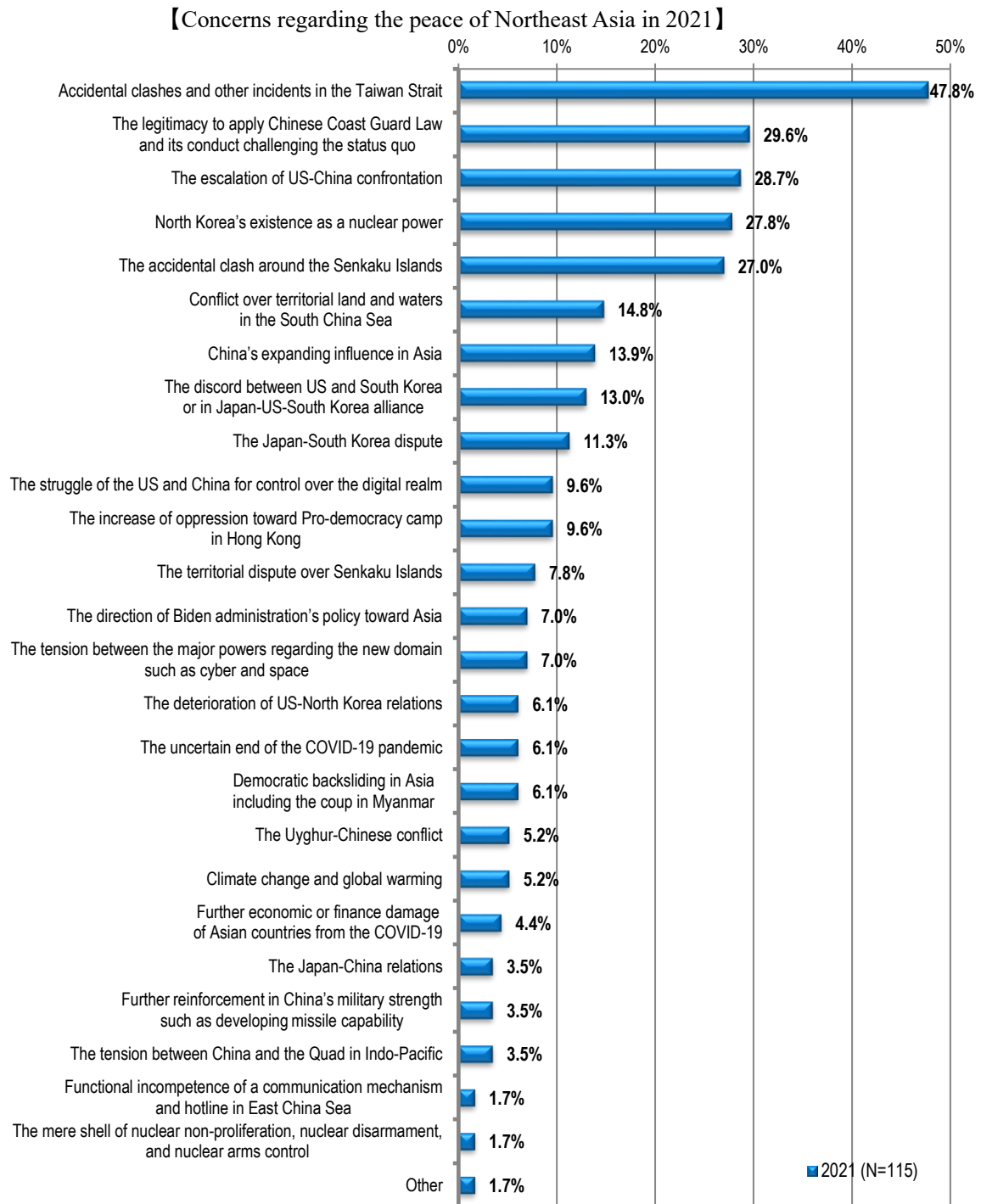
In Japan, Genron asked 55 national security and diplomatic experts to score each threat. In China,

Genron's partner in holding the Tokyo-Beijing Forum – China International Publishing Group – made the same request of 50 individuals with similar expertise. The Asan Institute for Policy Studies handled scoring by 55 South Korean experts, and the Pacific Forum and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace worked together to organize the assessment among 35 US experts.

Assessment procedure and scoring criteria are described from next page.

Assessment Step 1: Obtain threats to be assessed from Japanese academics.

The first stage of the survey involved distributing a questionnaire to 2,000 academics and intellectuals who work with Genron, and summarizing the answers received from 115 respondents. This questionnaire allowed us to obtain 19 assessment threats for the experts to evaluate and assign points to in the second stage of the survey.

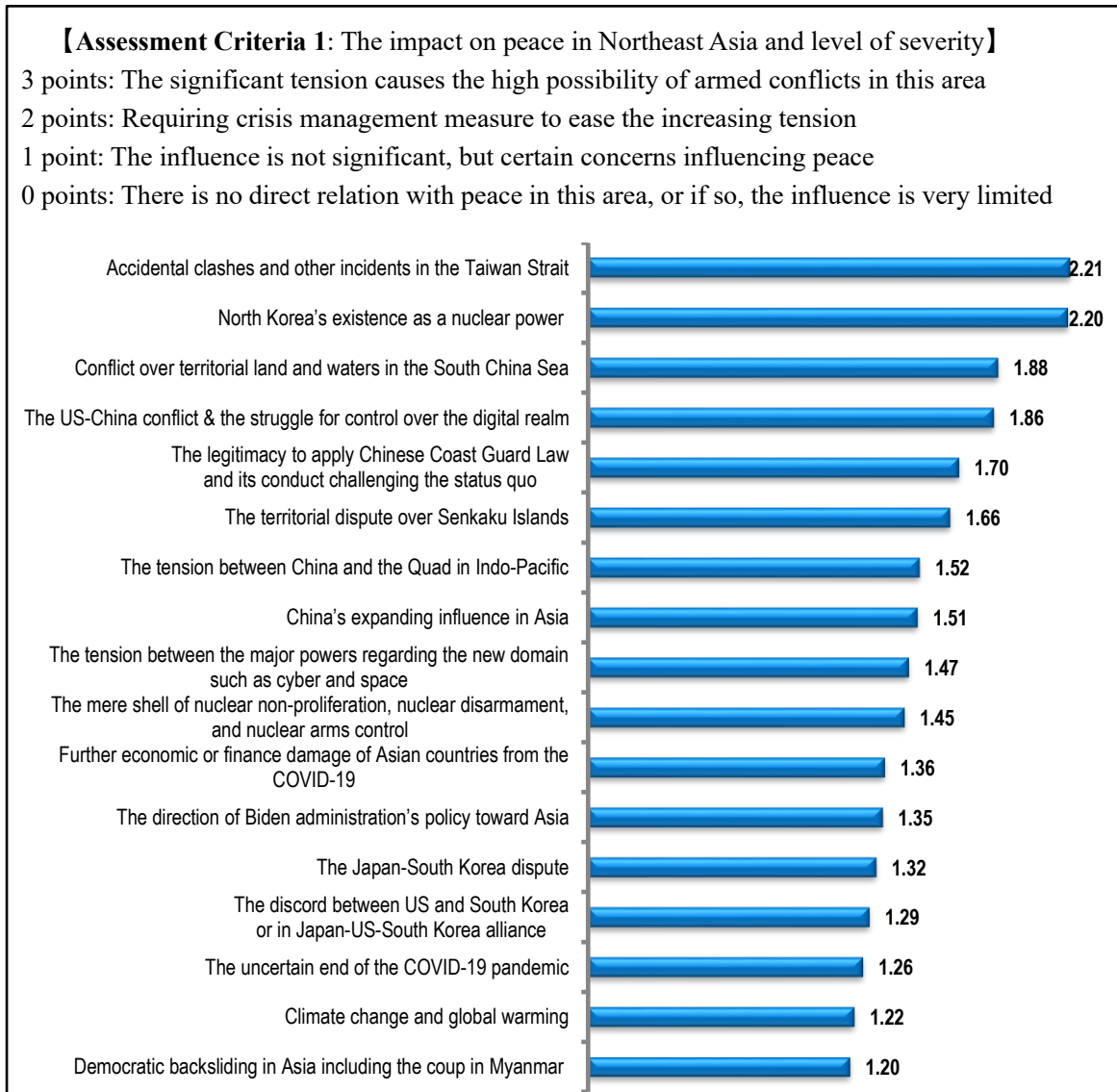


Assessment Step 2: 195 experts in diplomacy and national security from Japan, the US, China, and South Korea assessed the 19 threat on two factors.

The 195 diplomatic and national security experts from Japan, the US, China, and South Korea were asked to score each one on i) impact on peace in Northeast Asia and level of severity ii) in terms of the how possible it is that the issue will flare up and cause real damage in 2021

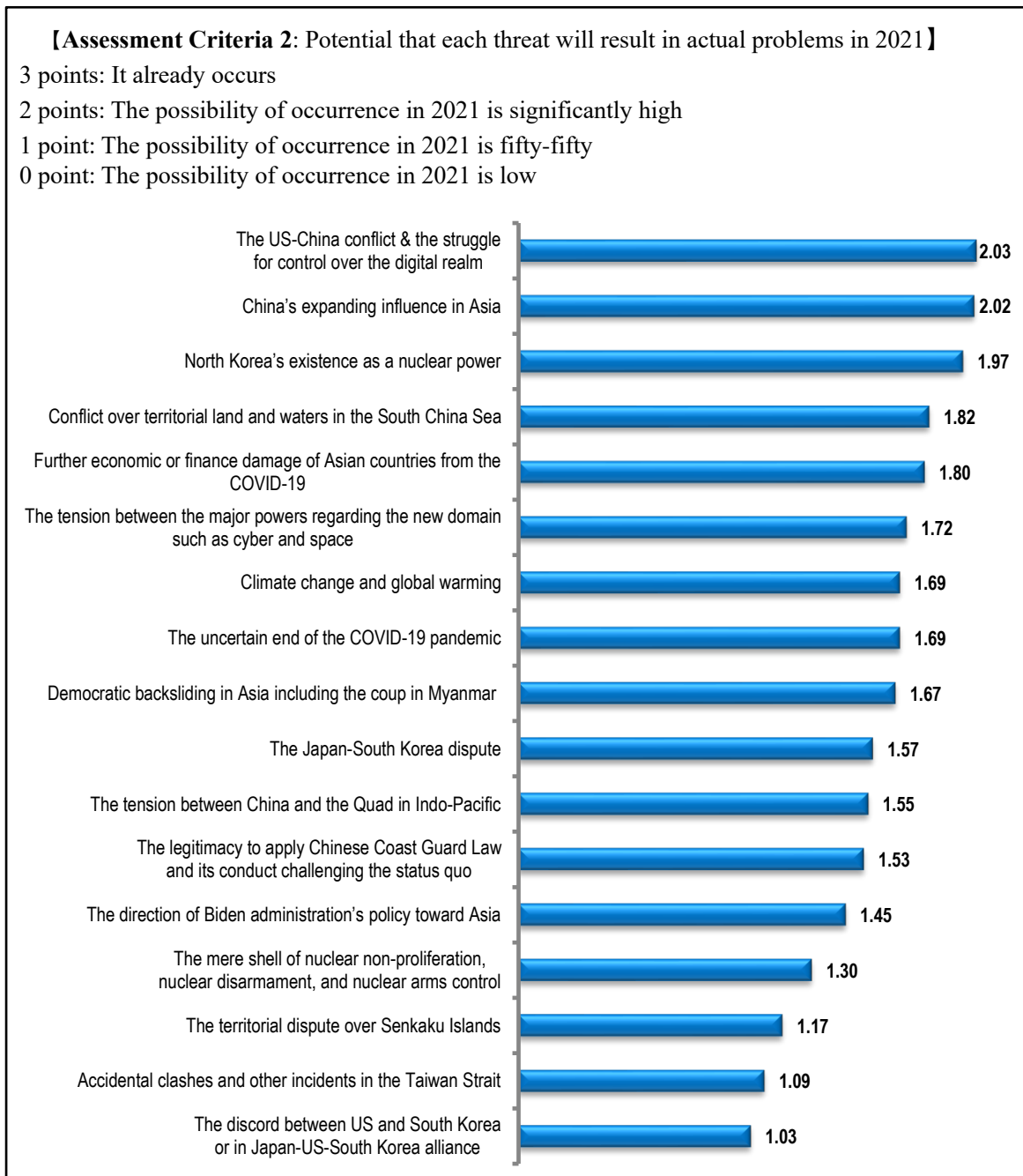
Assessment Criteria 1: The impact on peace in Northeast Asia and level of severity

In the first assessment, the experts evaluated each risk for its potential impact on peace in Northeast Asia and its level of severity, and gave it a mark out of the three. The top two risks thought to be the largest threat to peace in the region were a potential clash or other unforeseen incident in the Taiwan Strait, with an average rating of 2.21 points, and North Korea’s existence as a nuclear power, with an average rating of 2.20 points.



Assessment Criteria 2: Potential that each threat will result in actual problems in 2021.

Next, experts assigned a score out of three for each risk on its potential to cause trouble or damage that threatens the peace in Northeast Asia in 2021. The highest-ranking threat was deemed to be the US-China conflict & the struggle for control over the digital realm, with an average rating of 2.03 points, followed by China’s expanding influence in Asia, with an average rating of 2.02, and North Korea’s existence as a nuclear power at an average rating of 1.97 points. These three potential risks are seen by the experts to be most likely to arise and cause issues in 2021.



A risk ranking was then calculated by combining the scores assigned under criteria 1 and 2, and “Top 10 Risks Threaten a Peace in Northeast Asia” were determined. North Korea’s existence as a nuclear power was ranked the highest threat. Much of the reason for its rank is that it received a high rating of 2.20 for criteria 1, measuring potential impact and severity, due to the enormous size and extent of the potential damage of a nuclear weapon being used.

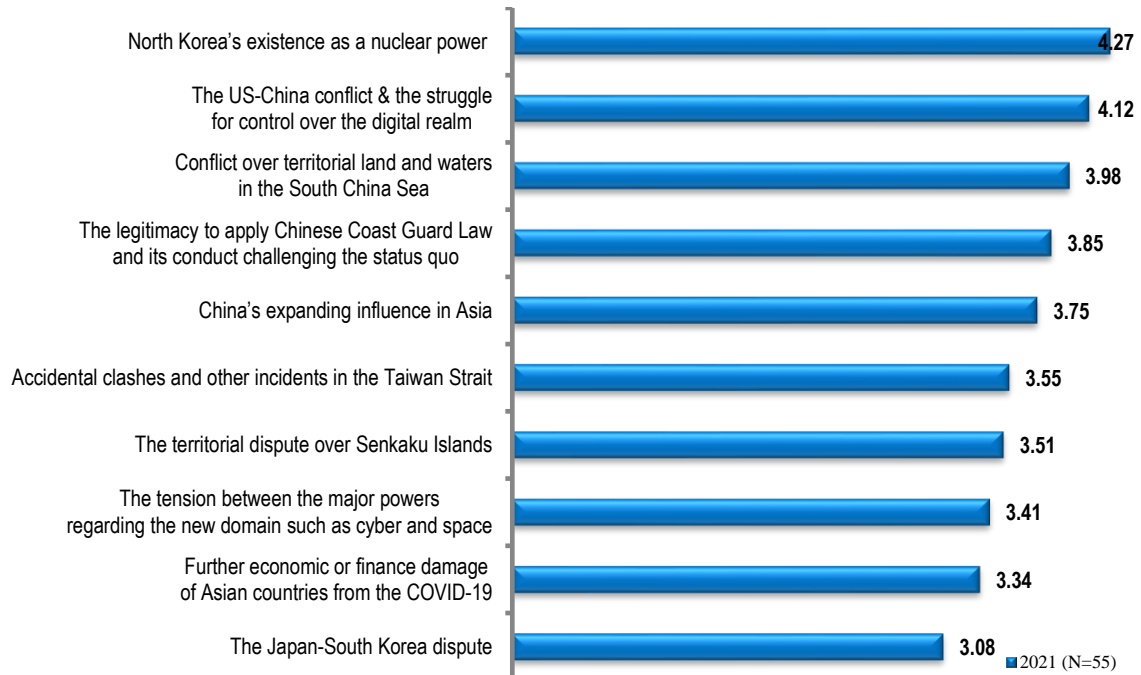
Second place in the ranking was the US-China conflict & the struggle for control over the digital realm, which are already seeing signs of worsening. The potential for actual damage in 2021 to arise due to this issue was assigned a high rating of 2.03 by the experts, which contributed to its high overall ranking.

Third place was the conflict over territorial land and waters in the South China Sea, which was ranked highly under both criteria, at 1.88 points in criteria 1 and 1.82 in criteria two. This is due to multiple reasons, including the already tangible conflicts between China, the US, and the ASEAN countries, and the potential for severe impact if the situation escalates.

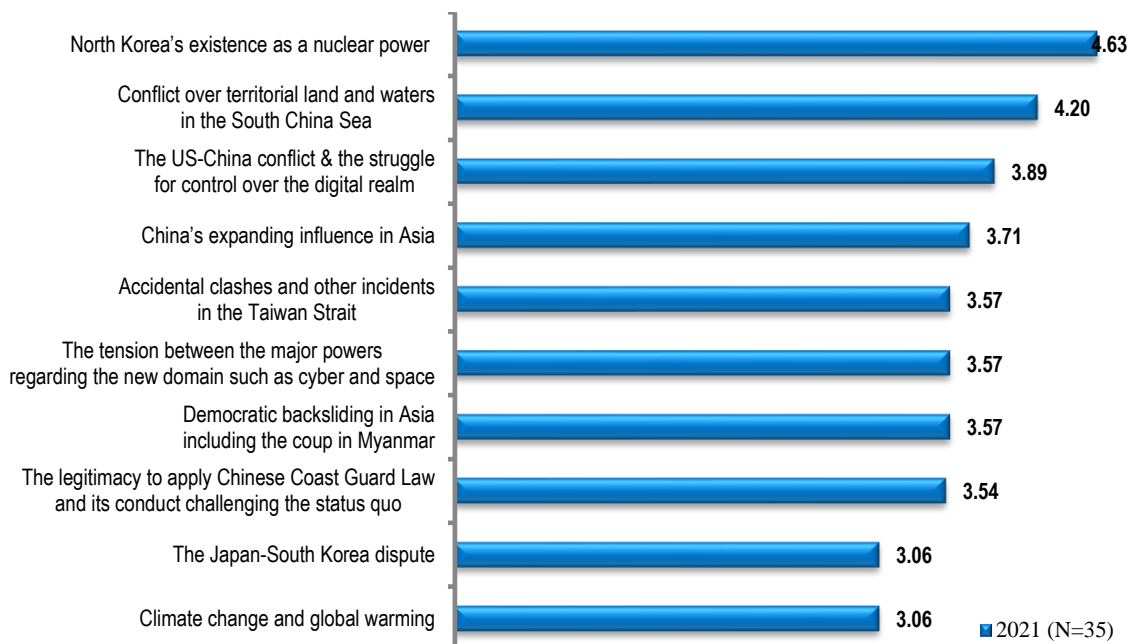
Result by the countries of experts

By combining the points of criteria 1 (out of three points) and criteria 2 (out of three points), the total scores (out of six points) were obtained. The graphs below indicate the final scores of the threat in Northeast Asia in 2021 by countries of experts.

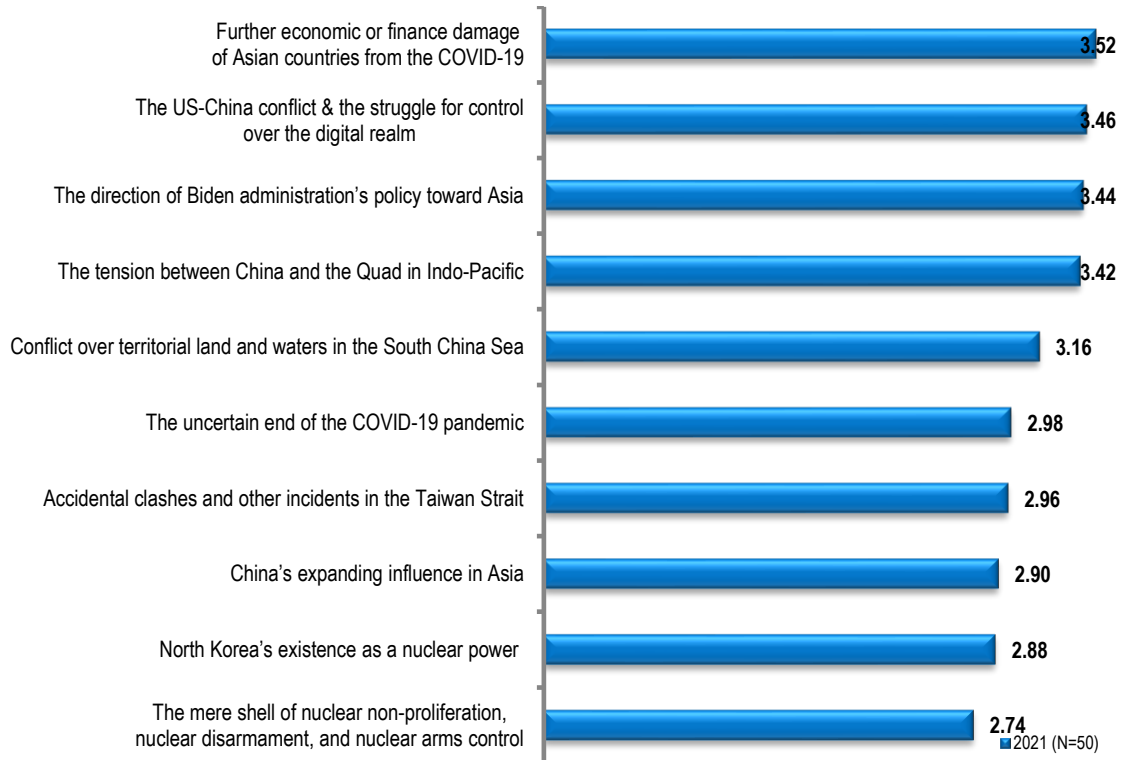
【Japanese experts】



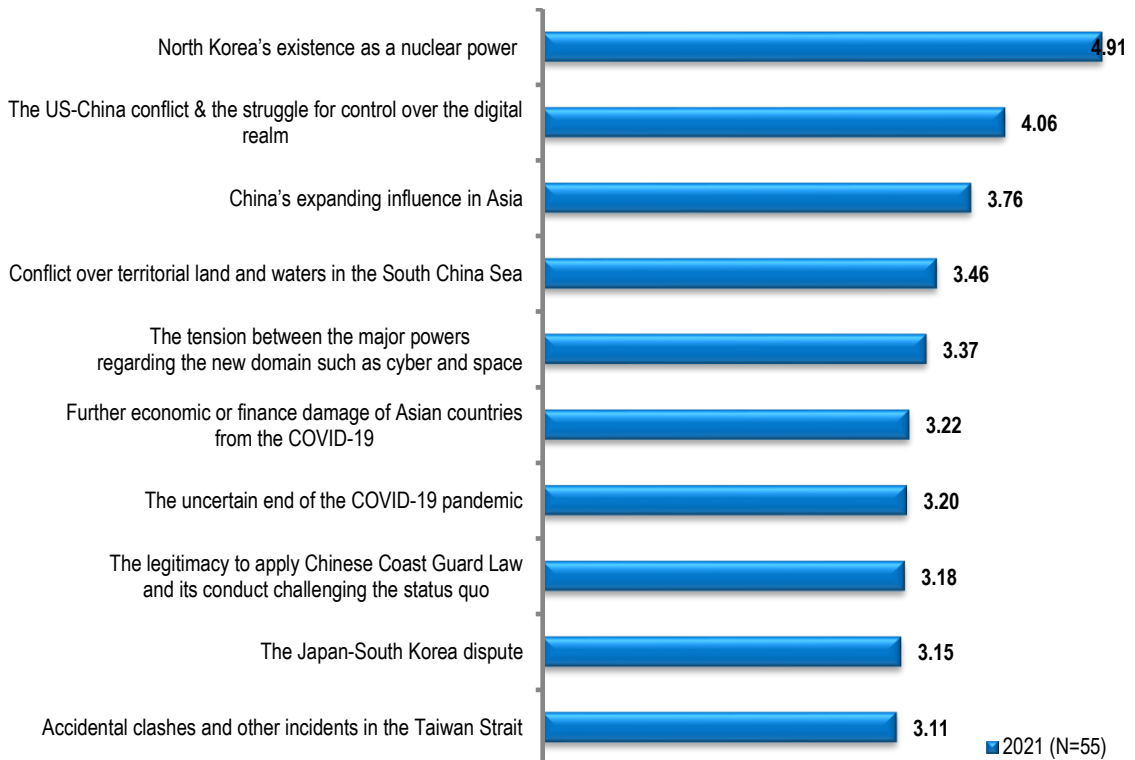
【American experts】



【Chinese experts】



【Korean experts】



Top 10 Risks

Threaten a Peace in Northeast Asia 2021

1. North Korea's existence as a nuclear power

Risk Rating: 4.17 points



A panel of experts at the United Nations Security Council investigated the effectiveness of sanctions against North Korea and released a report in September 2020 that indicated the country continues to conduct nuclear research and develop ballistic missiles, and that it has “it has probably developed miniaturized nuclear devices to fit into the warheads of its ballistic missiles.” In fact, 2020 saw North Korea conduct repeated missile test launches

in March, and it unveiled a new intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) at the October 2020 military parade marking the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Workers' Party of Korea. In addition, at the 8th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea held in January 2021, Kim Jong-un clarified the country's confrontational stance toward the US, alongside his intention to further strengthen their nuclear deterrence.

The new strategic direction of the US is difficult to predict, as newly-elected US President Joe Biden is working with and sharing opinions with his allies, a process that takes longer than the unilateral approach of former US President Donald Trump.

To begin with, the Biden administration's prioritization of nuclear issues seems to be focused on extending negotiations for the New START Treaty with Russia and on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran, so it is difficult to predict how earnest its efforts towards North Korea will be. Furthermore, although cooperation between Japan, the United States, and South Korea is absolutely necessary, there are no signs of an improvement in relations between Japan and South Korea. It seems as if Northeast Asia will have no choice but to learn to live with the nuclear threat from North Korea as no one will be working towards the abolition of nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula in 2021.

2. The US-China conflict and the struggle for control over the digital realm

Risk Rating: 3.88 points



The US-China relationship is still one of conflict in the realms of trade, technology, and security, a continuation of the situation from 2020. In addition, the US has increased its criticism of China and implemented economic sanctions in response to issues surrounding human rights conditions in Xinjiang, application of the National Security Law in Hong Kong, and more. The battlefield is expanding with the addition of increased animosity regarding the response

to the spread of COVID-19. In July 2020, four cabinet-level US government officials, including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, gave speeches clarifying the US' confrontational attitude towards China and showing how its criticism of China was growing stronger.

Joe Biden's electoral victory in November led to the inauguration of his new administration, but the hardline stance towards China can no longer be described as partisan – the current administration is expected to continue this policy. Unless China actually changes its behavior, it will be difficult for the Biden administration to cooperate with them in dealing with issues it is prioritizing, such as infectious disease and climate change.

The sheer extent of economic and trade interdependence between the two countries will make it difficult to work towards the “containment” of China, but it is almost certain that the conflict between the US and China will continue to pose a threat to the world in 2021.

3. Conflict over territorial land and waters in the South China Sea

Risk Rating: 3.70 points



China and ASEAN continue to work on formulating a code of conduct (COC) to prevent the outbreak of conflict in the South China Sea. The first phase of the COC was completed in July 2019, earlier than planned, and the involved parties had expressed the intention to reach a conclusion by the end of 2021, but the COVID-19 outbreak has delayed further discussions.

However, ASEAN countries are strengthening their relationships with countries that have no territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea. This trend can be seen in a November 2020 social media post by Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr., who wrote that the COC does not exclude powers from outside the region, and in the joint exercise conducted in the South China Sea between the Vietnamese and Indian navies in December 2020.

In response, China is appealing for the exclusion of foreign powers, and pointing to the US, which is dispatching military ships to the South China Sea to strengthen its involvement in the region. China has stated that the US is interfering with the work of formulating the COC, and is calling on other countries in the region to remain vigilant and oppose the actions of the US.

Moreover, China's coast guard law took effect in February 2021, and operations conducted under that law could end up sparking off further conflict in the South China Sea.

4. China's expanding influence in Asia

Risk Rating: 3.53 points



China has continued to strengthen its military and economic involvement in ASEAN and other emerging countries around Asia through its maritime incursions in the South China Sea, its Belt and Road Initiative, and more. Laos and Cambodia have essentially fallen under the control of China under its “Southward Policy”, in which it is using aid as a tool for gaining influence. On 1 February 2021, a coup was launched by the armed forces of Myanmar, a

country in which China is working to expand its influence through the construction of a “China-Myanmar Economic Corridor” and other means.

Myanmar is geopolitically important because it lies between southern China and the Indian Ocean. If the US 7th Fleet blocks the Strait of Malacca in the event of an incident in Taiwan, China will lose access to energy resources and could face a life-or-death situation. It is a matter of national security for them to secure the necessary access to the Indian Ocean with a base outside of the US sphere of influence.

However, Myanmar also has an important role to play in the Indo-Pacific Initiative being promoted by Japan, the US, Australia, and India. This is particularly true for India as Myanmar is the only ASEAN country with which it shares a border, making it of high strategic importance. Deep-seated anti-Chinese sentiment in Myanmar means that it is not necessarily predestined to being brought under Beijing's umbrella. However, if the international community attempts to bring down the military government by enforcing economic sanctions, public sentiment may turn to China and China's influence may increase. If that occurs, Myanmar may become a seed of conflict with Japan, the US, Australia, and India – particularly the latter – even if the threat of it happening in 2021 is low.

5. Accidental clashes and other incidents in the Taiwan Strait

Risk Rating: 3.30 points



The administration of former President Trump strengthened US involvement with Taiwan by selling them a total of \$17.4 billion worth of weapons between January 2017, when Trump was inaugurated, and October 2020. In addition, US warships passed through the Taiwan Strait 13 times in 2020 alone.

This policy regarding Taiwan is expected to remain fundamentally unchanged under the Biden administration, as seen in their sending of a destroyer through the strait on 4 February.

China vehemently opposes the US position on Taiwan. Chinese military aircraft have been more active in entering Taiwan's air defense identification zone since 2020, and there has been an increase in incursions into the waters around Dongsha Island – a valuable military position located near the southern end of the Taiwan Strait and the western edge of the Bashi Channel. China is clearly showing its opposition to the US and Taiwan as what were once simple return flights involving one or two aircraft have become large formations of aircraft of different types.

Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen repeated her declaration that Taiwan would not accept a “One China, two systems” offer. The peaceful unification of the two countries is becoming more and more difficult, and there is increased risk of the situation in the Taiwan Strait suddenly erupting in 2021. This will depend on the actions of Xi Jinping, who could be looking for tangible successes to lean on for the 20th National Party Congress in 2022, in which he could be selected to remain on for a third term as President.



6. The legitimacy to apply Chinese Coast Guard Law and its conduct challenging the status quo

Risk Rating: 3.23 points



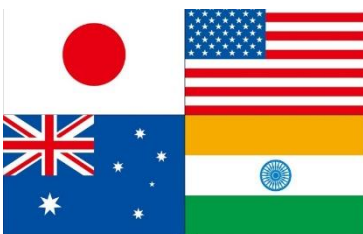
7. The tension between the major powers regarding the new domain such as cyber and space

Risk Rating: 3.19 points



8. Economic damage and increasing debt in Asian countries caused by COVID-19 pandemic

Risk Rating: 3.16 points



9. The tension between China and the Quad in Indo-Pacific

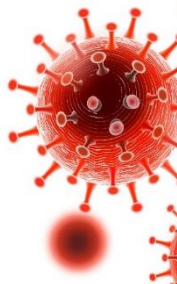
Risk Rating: 3.07 points



10. The uncertain end of the COVID pandemic

Risk Rating: 2.94 points

COVID-19
CORONAVIRUS



About The Genron NPO

In Cooperation With:

Republic of Korea: The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

China: The China International Publishing Group (CIPG)

The United States: The Carnegie Endowment for International
Peace, Pacific Forum

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