

# **Roundtable: U.S.-Japan-R.O.K.**

## **CONFERENCE REPORT**

### **FOURTH ANNUAL TRILATERAL JAPAN - U.S. - ROK CONFERENCE**

**MAY 31, 2007**

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#### **BY DONALD S. ZAGORIA**

The National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP), in cooperation with the Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA) and the International Policy Studies Institute of Korea (IpsiKor), co-hosted a meeting of security specialists from the U.S. and its two Northeast Asian allies, Japan and South Korea, on May 31, 2007, in Tokyo. There were current and former government officials, as well as academics, in attendance. (See Appendix A for the list of participants.)

This was the fourth such conference of its kind. Earlier meetings were held in Tokyo, Seoul and New York.

The purpose of these trilateral meetings is to provide an opportunity for policy analysts, officials and former officials from the three allies to engage in a frank and forthright dialogue out of the media spotlight. This allows participants to talk about longer range issues as well as current challenges, and to chart a common long-range strategy for dealing with security challenges. This most recent meeting concentrated on three issues: the upcoming 2008 presidential elections in Taiwan and the prospects for resumption of the cross-Strait dialogue; the potential for success of the Six-Party Talks on the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula; and how to strengthen the key regional bilateral relationships.

The summary which follows draws upon: the discussions at the meeting in Tokyo and several papers distributed at the meeting - one written for the conference by Dr. Han Sung-Joo, "North Korean Nuclear Weapons and the Korea Triangle," and a presentation by retired ROK General Cha Young-koo, "The Reestablishment of a Sound ROK-U.S. Alliance is a Vital Element of Peace and Security in Northeast Asia." The summary also draws on a speech made to the conference by Mr. Shigeru Ishiba, Japan's Defense Minister from 2002-2004 and currently an LDP member in the House of Representatives.

#### **THE KEY REGIONAL RELATIONSHIPS: A U.S. PERSPECTIVE**

An American participant summarized the key regional relationships in the following general terms.

U.S.-Japan relations are better than at any time in the post-World War II period. There is a total absence of contention on economic issues. The U.S. is relieved that Japanese economic growth continues but still maintains a concern about the potential for an economic recession in Japan in the future. In the security realm, the U.S. is supportive of a greater Japanese role in maintaining global peace and security and there is no opposition in the U.S. to amending the Japanese constitution in ways that would facilitate such a role. Japan is working with the United States on missile defense, and U.S. strategy in the Asia-Pacific region continues to rely on the maintenance of key bases in Japan.

In the political realm, Japan is a mature democracy which allows for full civil liberties, the rule of law and full and free competitive elections. The U.S. is concerned about the downturn in Japan's bilateral relations in Northeast Asia and remains hopeful that Prime Minister Abe will continue to improve Japan's relations with South Korea, China and Russia.

U.S.-China relations are complex. There are areas of cooperation and areas of competition, e.g. in economics and trade. In the political sphere, China has made extraordinary advances from rigid authoritarianism to authoritarian pluralism with greatly expanded (if still limited) political rights. The PRC's fourth generation leaders are focused on their domestic problems. In the economic realm, China continues to make rapid economic progress.

In the strategic realm, China has rapidly expanded its reach, especially in Asia. The Chinese say they are still vastly weaker than the United States and that they need good relations with their neighbors in order to avoid encirclement.

Both U.S. and Chinese leaders are working to maintain and expand their cooperative relationship.

Turning to U.S. relations with the two Koreas, the U.S. speaker said that U.S.-ROK relations are now better than they were in the recent past because the U.S. has moved closer to the ROK position on North Korea. But another factor is the realization in South Korea that maintaining a relationship with a benign distant power such as the United States, in order to balance neighboring powers, is a good idea, particularly when the relationship with neighboring powers has historically been fraught with great difficulty. However the speaker pointed out that although the U.S. alliance with the ROK will remain firm, both the ROK and Japan will demand more responsibility and more rights within the alliance.

Turning to U.S. relations with North Korea, the U.S. speaker said that this relationship depends now on North Korean actions. The United States is increasingly receptive to better relations with the DPRK, but everything will depend on North Korea's taking reciprocal steps.

The speaker concluded by saying that the time was not yet ripe for a Northeast Asia Security system but bilateral relations would increasingly be mixed with multilateralism.

## **AN ROK PERSPECTIVE: THE NEED TO REVITALIZE THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE**

A South Korean speaker provided an overview of the U.S.-ROK alliance. He began by saying that U.S.-ROK relations had improved recently because anti-American sentiment in Korea has weakened; there has been a successful outcome of the U.S.-ROK free trade agreement and the U.S. has softened its policy on North Korea to bring it more into accord with the South Korean position. He cautioned, however, that the improvement in U.S.-ROK relations may simply be a temporary phenomenon. A more comprehensive re-patching of fundamental differences between the allies is still needed.

The speaker went on to relate the U.S.-ROK alliance to internal political factors in South Korea. Much of the steep decline in President Roh Moo-hyun's approval ratings (below 30% at their nadir) could be attributed to several unpopular policies. One such policy cited included actions which were viewed as weakening ROK-U.S. ties. Moreover, in the past year or so, there has been a public debate on alliance transformation with a clash of opinions between progressive and conservative elements within the Korean public. In the course of this debate, there has been an unexpected positive outcome: a gradual learning curve has manifested itself in which there is now greater public recognition, acknowledgement and reaffirmation of the importance of the alliance.

The speaker went on to say that there had been several changes over the 50-year existence of the U.S.-ROK alliance, but the alliance now requires a qualitative change. He made several recommendations: first, change the specific threat-based alliance target against North Korea to a capability-based strategic alliance better able to respond to strategic uncertainty; second, change the currently rigid structure of the alliance to a more agile structure; third, expand the current single-mission function (defense against the DPRK) to multiple-task missions; and fourth, change the local scope of the alliance to a regional and global scope. Future missions for the alliance outlined by the speaker included: counter-terrorism, counter-proliferation, regional stabilization, peacekeeping, intelligence sharing, sea lane protection and environmental protection. Also the U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral coordination should be reinvigorated, but not in such a way as to isolate China.

The speaker concluded by saying that the U.S.-ROK alliance required a joint strategic vision for the 21st century.

In the discussion which followed, several participants agreed with the general thrust of these remarks. One American participant said that in the past, the U.S.-ROK alliance had been formed against a common threat, e.g. North Korea. Now the task is to decide what the alliance stands for.

### **ANOTHER ROK PERSPECTIVE: TWO EMERGING TRIANGLES**

A second South Korean participant prepared a provocative paper arguing that in the past few weeks - the spring of 2007 - there was evidence of a "basic shift" taking place in the situation on the Korean peninsula, especially in U.S. policy on the North Korean nuclear issue. The essence of the shift, according to this participant, was that the United States now seemed prepared to accept, even if it did not officially recognize, a situation in which North Korea retains a limited nuclear weapons capability. The South Korean participant argued that this shift in Bush

Administration policy towards North Korea was brought about by the muddle in Iraq, setbacks in Iran, the victory of the Democratic Party in the mid-term congressional elections, and the North Korean nuclear test. Whatever precipitated the shift, he said, there clearly has been a rethinking of U.S. strategy. The Bush Administration had now come to believe that there will be no dismantling of the North Korean nuclear capability without freezing it first - a view which it initially condemned.

As evidence of this proposition, he cited: 1. The visit by DPRK Vice Minister Kim Kye-Gwan to the United States where he received "red carpet treatment" by Americans both inside and outside of the government; 2. The United States and the DPRK began bilateral talks aimed at normalizing relations; 3. The United States had unconditionally opened the way for the transfer of the previously embargoed DPRK funds in Macao.

The ROK participant argued that the bottom line was that the United States was "moving the goal post" in such a way as to make it easier to normalize U.S. relations with the DPRK. He argued that the United States was moving towards a policy that would allow North Korea to keep its nuclear weapons and material so that North Korea's status as a nuclear weapons state would be accepted, even if it was not officially recognized. He concluded that the U.S., by moving in this direction, is following the pattern of U.S. policy towards India and Pakistan. It would be a long time, he concluded, before North Korea is denuclearized.

The speaker went on to say that China, like the United States, is also prepared to accept North Korea as a nuclear weapons state with a limited nuclear capability. This position he contrasted with seeking the complete removal of the weapons which risks either a military conflict or the collapse of the North Korean regime.

South Korea, too, he argued, is prepared to let North Korea get away with its nuclear weapons and material.

These moves on the nuclear front, he went on, are accompanied by strategic changes. South Korea is moving closer to China but the alliance with the United States will remain for the foreseeable future. Indeed, the pendulum is moving slowly back to closer relations with the United States, especially with the signing of the Free Trade Agreement. North Korea is moving towards an equidistant policy between China and the United States, but the question is, how far it will move. Finally, there is an understanding between China and the United States that it is better to freeze North Korea's nuclear program now, rather than try to achieve a quick, Libya-style solution thereby allowing North Korea to continue to expand its nuclear program.

The South Korean participant concluded his paper by arguing that there are two triangles evolving in contemporary Northeast Asia. One is among the United States, China and South Korea. The other is that of the United States, China and North Korea. The essence of this development is that the relationship between China and South Korea is expanding and the United States and North Korea are beginning a journey towards rapprochement. How to explain this new strategic development? The speaker said that in order to explain this new development, it was necessary to analyze the strategic thinking of the key players.

China now has three basic goals towards the Korean Peninsula. First, it wants to maintain North Korea's existence as a sovereign state. It does not want the disruption that would follow the collapse of North Korea. Second, China wants peace on the Korean Peninsula. Any armed conflict would disrupt its current goal of focusing on what it calls "peaceful development" and becoming a great power in due course. Third, China wants denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Nevertheless, China has also decided that the price of working for a complete denuclearization of North Korea at the current moment is simply too high.

The Bush Administration, for its part, has also come to the same conclusion. It has decided that as long as North Korea does not transfer nuclear material or weapons, it is best to concentrate on a freeze of the current North Korean nuclear arsenal while seeking an accommodation with Pyongyang.

North Korea, according to this participant, is pursuing "salami tactics" - doling out inconsequential concessions while exacting big rewards. It seeks to lull the other members of the Six Party Talks into complacency. North Korea's goal is to make its nuclear weapons a fait accompli and to legitimize them.

Finally turning to South Korea, the participant said that the main goal of the ROK is to maintain peace on the Korean Peninsula through accommodation and maintaining cooperative relations with the DPRK. In recent years, South Korea has emphasized carrots and insisted on no pressure on North Korea. Now that the United States has revised its policy towards North Korea, this ROK policy will be easier to maintain.

In conclusion, the Korean participant put his analysis in historical perspective. Since the late 19th century, he argued, a big point of contention among Korean elites has been whether to ally with maritime or continental powers. After World War II, circumstances made the North choose the continental powers, i.e. the Soviet Union and China while South Korea chose the maritime powers headed by the United States. Today, he said, both North and South Korea are feeling wary of their respective post -World War II partners. They both see an opportunity to adjust their partnerships, not to change them, but to be friends with both China and the United States. This policy, he said, would be very difficult and complex to manage, especially for South Korea. An American participant, commenting on this analysis, said that U.S. policy may well end up where the South Korean speaker said it would. But the Bush Administration had not yet made the decision to contain rather than to dismantle North Korea's nuclear capability. The February 13 agreement does insist on North Korean reciprocity

## **A JAPANESE PERSPECTIVE: THE NEED FOR A CHANGE IN MENTALITY**

A Japanese participant argued that Japan must change its mentality about its own security and about global security. Most Japanese do not think about what military force is required either for Japan's own security or for global security. They think global security will be taken care of by the United States, but, the speaker argued, Japan needs to think about what it can do to help maintain global security.

Under Prime Minister Abe, the speaker continued, there is now a discussion in Japan of Japan's right to collective self-defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter. This is the inherent right of any country. Yet most Japanese think that Japan cannot implement that right. If you ask most Japanese about the inherent right of self-defense, you will get few answers.

Although the speaker said that he supported Japan's right to collective self-defense, there first had to be a good understanding of how Japan might have avoided World War II. There also needed to be a good understanding of the suffering that Japan caused in China, Korea, the Philippines, Singapore and Malaysia. Some Japanese claim that Japan fought World War II for Asian independence, but he personally did not agree with this view. In any case, Japan needed to come to terms with its past or else a policy of collective self-defense will be seen as a resurgence of the Greater Co-Prosperity Sphere.

### **THE JAPAN-ROK RELATIONSHIP**

There was a good deal of discussion of the troubled relationship between Japan and South Korea. A South Korean participant was optimistic. He said that a Japan-ROK security dialogue had begun and will continue. Military to military contacts are growing. He also pointed to joint historical studies now being undertaken as a positive part of this process. But on the negative side of the ledger, Japan and the ROK differ on the proper approach to North Korea and there continues to be a territorial dispute over the Takeshima/Dokdo islands which are claimed by both sides.

Another South Korean participant said that history was still a big issue because many Japanese did not share the view that Japanese imperialism caused a lot of harm to the Korean people. Moreover, being "anti-Japanese" was popular in South Korea. President Roh's approval rating went up after he took a tough stand on Japan. The history issue, he concluded, could not be solved until the Japanese changed their view of history. However, having said all of that, the historical issue need not be a permanent obstacle to improved Japan-ROK relations.

### **THE NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR ISSUE**

An American participant said that North Korea posed a very tough challenge because it was such a difficult country to understand. We do not understand the policy making process in North Korea, he noted. For instance, is Kim Jong-Il the final authority, or is he in some kind of alliance with the military? Is North Korea's nuclear program a product of genuine fear, or is it a bargaining chip? Or is it a way to please the North Korean military as conventional weapons prove to be increasingly antiquated? Perhaps it is a combination of all three.

The American went on to express cautious optimism on the issue. First, North Korea has never been more isolated. China was fairly tough in denouncing Pyongyang's nuclear test, and Beijing pushed North Korea back to the bargaining table. China does not want a nuclear North Korea. But it also does not want a collapsed North Korea. The second reason for optimism is that U.S. policy towards North Korea has become more flexible. Pyongyang wants to establish its credentials in the international banking system and, with the resolution of the Banco Delta Asia

issue, there may now be an opportunity for it to do so. But, concluded the American speaker, it would be crucial for the other five parties in the talks to insist on reciprocity from Pyongyang.

## **CONCLUSION**

The presentations and discussion at this trilateral meeting demonstrated that the key regional relationships in the Asia/Pacific region are now undergoing rapid change. U.S.-China, U.S.-Japan, U.S.-ROK and U.S.-DPRK relations are all changing. So are relations among the other key players in the region, especially Japan and China. However, there was also a recognition that though there was an evolution in these relationships and alliances, they were still extremely important to maintain. Therefore, planning for the future thoughtfully and strategically is imperative.

Another theme that was brought to the forefront of the conference involved Northeast Asian security writ large. Though most of the participants agreed that the time is not yet ripe for a formalized Northeast Asian security system, it was understood that bilateral relations will increasingly be mixed with multilateralism. Therefore, one of the overarching challenges for policymakers today will be to find the proper formula whereby the troubled power relations within Northeast Asia could be assuaged, both through the strengthening of bilateral relations as well as by leaving the door open for a type of ad hoc multilateralism as situations arise. By maximizing and strengthening the present U.S. - ROK and U.S. - Japan bilateral alliances, the United States will be able to focus on our common and strategic interests in the region with countries like China and North Korea.

Finally, there seemed to be some uncertainty as to whether countries such as China, South Korea and the United States would be able to tolerate a North Korea which retained some of its nuclear weapons. Because of the ambiguity regarding what each country would be amenable to, further discussions to flesh out baseline policies are warranted, so that no member of the Six Party Talks is taken unawares in the future.