



U.S.-Japan-China-ROK Quadrilateral Dialogue

May 23, 2012

By Donald S. Zagoria

The NCAFP, the Korea Society and the ASAN Institute of South Korea co-hosted a quadrilateral dialogue among American, Japanese, Chinese and Korean security analysts on May 23, 2012 to discuss the prospects for cooperation among the four powers in Northeast Asia. The participants are listed in the appendix.

Synopsis

On North Korea, the views divided along familiar lines with Americans, Japanese and Koreans arguing that the approach to the DPRK should be a combination of pressure, containment and keeping the door open to negotiations, while the Chinese stressed the need for patience, maintaining stability on the Korean peninsula and avoiding coercion which might make the situation worse. One Chinese participant even suggested that the four powers consider a Marshall Plan for the DPRK while others responded that this was unrealistic.

On the potential for quadrilateral cooperation, there was broad agreement on the potential for cooperation on non-traditional security issues such as non-proliferation, terrorism, nuclear safety and disaster response.

There was a general agreement that quadrilateral discussions and cooperation, official and non-official, underscore that the American focus on the region is an attempt to build a Pacific Community, not a design to encircle or contain China. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in Oslo on June 1, 2012, although the United States and China often disagreed, they had many mutual interests and the Obama Administration is determined to cultivate cooperative relations on a host of economic and security issues.

Some Selected Themes

Korean Public Opinion.

A Korean analyst noted an interesting mix of views in South Korea on relations with North Korea, China and the United States.

On the one hand, because of nervousness about the rise of China some 75% of the Korean population thinks that an alliance with the United States will be necessary even after unification. On the other hand, 51% of the Korean population sees China as the most important partner for improving relations with North Korea. Finally, following the death of DPRK leader Kim Jong-Il, a major shift took place in the ongoing debate within South Korean society about the best way to interact with North Korea – hard line versus engagement. After Kim’s death, support for an engagement policy increased by 9.0 percent while there was a substantial decline in support for a harder line.

Deterioration in Japan-China-ROK relations.

A Japanese analyst pointed out deterioration in Japan-China-ROK relations. The Japan-ROK relationship continued to be damaged by historical memory and territorial issues. The Japanese Defense Minister was forced to cancel a visit to Seoul in May 2012 because of lack of progress on the “history issue,” i.e. the Japanese use of Korean “comfort women” during World War II.

Around the same time, a high level Chinese military official cancelled a visit to Tokyo, apparently because of a Japanese politician’s remarks on the Senkakus and the Japanese decision to hold a conference of Uighurs in Tokyo.

The Japanese analyst also noted that the three countries had a difference of approach to North Korea. Japan and the ROK wanted to condemn the North Korean satellite launch but the Chinese refused and said that the best way to handle the DPRK issue was through engagement and not through pressure.

On a more positive note, another Japanese analyst noted that the three powers – Japan, China and the ROK – were cooperating in such areas as search and rescue, nuclear safety, energy and the environment. And these areas, he said, also provided a basis for quadrilateral cooperation as well.

Chinese Concerns about Pressure on North Korea.

Several Chinese participants warned that increasing pressure on North Korea would only make the situation more dangerous because North Korea will not give in to military pressure. One Chinese participant said there were only two options – peace or war. The great powers need to give the North Koreans a way out of their dilemma. And China was playing its role through quiet diplomacy.

Future Agendas.

There were many suggestions for future quadrilateral cooperation agendas. These included: developing a common vision for security in the Asia-Pacific region; working on the two flash points, North Korea and the South China Sea; coordinating development aid; working together to resolve Korean tensions; and working on the many issues which require broader cooperation, such as the environment, peacekeeping, piracy, educational exchange and climate change.

APPENDIX A

THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE ON AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY (NCAFP),
IN COOPERATION WITH THE KOREA SOCIETY,
PRESENTS

“A U.S.-CHINA-REPUBLIC OF KOREA-JAPAN QUADRILATERAL DIALOGUE”

WEDNESDAY, MAY 23ND, 2012

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