



## U.S.-Japan-ROK Trilateral Dialogue

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May 21 - 22, 2012

By Donald S. Zagoria

The NCAFP, the Korea Society, and the ASAN Institute of South Korea co-hosted a trilateral dialogue among American, Japanese and ROK security analysts on May 21-22, 2012 to discuss the prospects for increased security cooperation among the three allies. The participants in the dialogue are listed in the appendix.

This report is not an attempt to reach a consensus but rather reflects the views of the author. The author is indebted to Ambassador Winston Lord and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Evans Revere for sharing important insights.

The report is divided into four sections: the growing importance of trilateral security cooperation; dealing with North Korea; the challenge of a rising China; and some conclusions.

## **I. The Growing Importance of Trilateral Security Cooperation**

1. One of the Obama Administration's key foreign policy priorities in Northeast Asia has been to focus on U.S. relations with our two key allies—Japan and the ROK—and, since 2010, to strengthen trilateral security cooperation. One reason for developing such cooperation is the need to coordinate policies towards an increasingly provocative North Korea and to share perspectives on the complex challenge of a rising China. A second motivation is to reassure U.S. allies of a continued U.S. presence in a region of vital importance for U.S. interests. Yet another factor is that the three allies have discovered a similarity in positions on a broad range of global issues, from the Arab spring to counter piracy to Afghanistan and security in the Asia-Pacific region.
2. In recent years, there have been an increasing number of trilateral meetings, including a ministerial meeting in Bali last year and another scheduled for this year. And the three allies intend to set up a secretariat in order to coordinate on a regular basis. All three bilateral legs of the triangle remain strong but the Japan-ROK leg is the weakest link (see below).
3. The U.S.-Japan alliance is on steadier ground now than at any time in the recent past since the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) came to office several years ago. Japan's new Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda made a very successful visit to the White House on April 30 and he has emphasized relations with the United States in contrast to his predecessors who talked about "balancing" between the United States and China. There is solid public support in Japan for the alliance. According to a new public opinion survey in Japan in January 2012, more than 80 percent of the Japanese public support the alliance—a record high. The alliance is on better ground now for two reasons—rising concern in Japan over North Korea and a more assertive China, and the solid U.S. support for the triple disaster that struck Japan in March 2011.

4. The U.S.-ROK alliance, according to most analysts, is stronger now than at any time in the past 60 years. Close to 90 percent of the Korean public support the alliance and this support extends across the generational divide. Moreover, 75.3 percent of the Korean public believe that the alliance between the two nations will be necessary even after reunification. One reason for the extraordinary strength of the alliance is the twin challenges of a provocative North Korea and a rising China. A second is the persistent attention devoted by the Obama Administration to cultivating the alliance. A third is the close personal relationship between Presidents Obama and Lee Myung-bak. Finally, ROK President Lee has determined that a strong alliance with the U.S. is a precondition for dealing effectively both with China and with the DPRK.
5. The weakest link in the trilateral remains the Japan-ROK leg. This relationship remains sensitive because of territorial differences and painful historical memories of the Japanese colonization of Korea. Still, the two sides have reached agreement on protecting military information and intelligence that may be shared and an “acquisition and cross servicing” logistical accord. Unfortunately, a scheduled visit by the Japanese Defense Minister to Seoul in early May 2012 to sign agreements on these matters had to be postponed because of the lack of progress on the “history issue”—i.e. the Japanese use of Korean “comfort women” during World War II. The good news is that despite the history and territorial issues that continue to mar the relationship, a solid majority of Koreans, 54.3 percent, believe that an alliance with Japan will be needed in the face of a rising China. (See “South Korean Public Opinion on North Korea and the Nations of the Six Party Talks,” Jiyeon Kim and Karl Friedhoff, *The Asan Institute for Policy Studies*, October, 2011.)
6. There was considerable agreement with the suggestion by one participant that the three allies need to work on a statement that expresses their common strategic objectives. Threat perceptions among the three, especially regarding China, are different and need serious discussion.

## **II. Dealing with North Korea**

Despite tactical differences which emerge periodically, the three allies have a number of broad common interests and concerns regarding North Korea. They are all deeply concerned about provocative actions of the DPRK which threaten regional stability. They share deep concerns about the DPRK's nuclear and missile programs.

They have all condemned the April 13, 2012 launch of a satellite that used ballistic missile technology in violation of UN resolutions, and scuttled the Feb. 29 "Leap Day" agreement between the DPRK and the United States that had been reached a few weeks earlier. And they share an interest in a denuclearized North Korea that learns to live in peace with all of its neighbors and with the international community.

There was a broad spectrum of views among participants on how to deal with the North Korean challenge. The following represents some of the highlights of the discussion.

1. There was a wide consensus on the opening statement from an American participant that North Korea has no intention of giving up its core nuclear capability and, as a result, the allies have no choice but to focus on deterrence, containment and pressure while keeping the door open to dialogue if North Korea changes course.
2. A South Korean participant said that the ROK had made clear to the DPRK its opposition to another nuclear test or satellite launch and also expressed its determination to respond forcefully to any more North Korean provocations. The ROK has also announced that it will strengthen its own defense capabilities in close cooperation with the United States. And it will also continue to encourage China to restrain North Korea.

3. A Japanese participant said that there had been little diplomatic contact with the DPRK since 2008. There had been some informal contacts, but without much progress. And the DPRK's satellite launch in March 2012 contributed to a further deterioration in bilateral ties.
4. Several participants pointed to one encouraging sign—the fact that Russia was now taking a more vigorous stance on the DPRK issue. The Russians signed on to a G-8 statement in May which said:

“We continue to have deep concerns about provocative actions of the DPRK that threaten regional stability. We remain concerned about the DPRK's nuclear program, including its uranium enrichment program. We condemn the April 13, 2012 launch that used ballistic missile technology in direct violation of a UNSC resolution. We urge the DPRK to comply with its international obligations and abandon all nuclear and ballistic missile programs in a complete, verifiable and irreversible manner. We call on all UN member states to join the G-8 in fully implementing the UNSC resolutions in this regard. We affirm our willingness to call on the UN Security Council to take actions in response to additional DPRK acts, including ballistic missile launches and nuclear tests. We remain concerned about human rights violations in the DPRK, including the situation of political prisoners and the abduction issue.”

5. The fact that the Russians are now taking a more vigorous stance against the DPRK, coupled with the fact that the Chinese, although still supporting the DPRK, are weighing in heavily against any new missile or nuclear test, points to a substantial narrowing of North Korean options.
6. There also seemed to be a consensus among the group that deterrence is a necessary but not sufficient strategy for dealing with North Korea. There was broad agreement on keeping the door open for talks if North Korea shows signs of changing course in response to external and internal pressures. An American participant expressed what

seemed to be a common view that the precondition for the resumption of dialogue with the DPRK was for the North to begin implementing the February 29 “Leap Day” agreement: by freezing its plutonium production and its uranium enrichment; allowing a return to North Korea of the IAEA inspectors; agreeing to no more nuclear tests; and putting in place a moratorium on missile tests to include satellite launches.

7. A few participants, while sharing pessimism about North Korean nuclear intentions, urged engagement, including exchanges, to compliment pressures. This might not only ease tensions but could “subvert” the regime over time by opening the country to outside influences. Others countered that all engagement steps have already been offered to Pyongyang with absolutely no success, and that we don’t have time for a long-term attempt to undermine the regime.
8. There was some talk about the coming Presidential election in South Korea in December 2012 and how the results of that election might influence North-South Korean relations. One American participant said it was likely that the next ROK president—whether from the ruling party or the opposition—would want to reengage the DPRK. The new ROK president would not return to the “sunshine” policy of the past but rather to the 2000 and 2007 ROK-DPRK summit meeting agreements to which North Korea has frequently made reference. The question raised by the American participant was whether such a move, if it takes place, would be done in parallel with the United States
9. There was a general consensus that the best we could hope for until after elections/transitions in the U.S., South Korea and China was to keep matters from getting worse and deterring any further DPRK provocations.
10. There was agreement that China has been propping up and protecting North Korea and this was not likely to change soon. On the other hand, there is increasing debate in China, coming from think tanks and netizens, over its Korea policy and the costs

it incurs. And it was perhaps unprecedented when the Chinese officially castigated the North for its treatment of Chinese fishermen.

### III. Dealing with China

All three sides described a relationship with China that is, at best, mixed.

1. An American participant said that Sino-American relations, while resilient, will continue to be mixed and fluid. The two great powers will not be allies or even strong partners. But they will “almost certainly not be foes.” In short, the fixed menu for U.S.-China relations is “sweet and sour.” The American went on to warn against the two extreme camps: the apocalyptic and the apologetic.

The former camp of “dragon slayers” views China as a “looming enemy to be contained.” The latter camp of “panda huggers” sees China as a “looming comrade to be coddled.” The “dragon slayers” exaggerate China’s strength, ignore its vulnerabilities and fail to understand that Beijing, for the foreseeable future, is “too burdened by its huge domestic travails to mount foreign adventures.” Moreover, “containment is not an option.” It would “brew discord, if not conflict, strain our alliances and bonds with countries seeking good relations with this global giant. We would forfeit Chinese help on a host of issue which require joint efforts.” And we would further strain our resources.

The “panda-huggers” overlook the “darker features” of the Chinese landscape. They “shrug at its mercantilism, military surge,” and support of rogue regimes. Such indulgence betrays American values, harms our interests, and loses Congressional and public backing.

Fortunately the center of gravity rests with those who advocate a balanced approach. Eight successive Presidents, from Nixon to Obama, have pursued essentially the same course: a blend of cooperation, competition and contention.

In steering a course in this “high-stakes game against an unreadable challenger”, the American participant offered the following advice:



- Above all, rebuild America. Policy toward China begins at home. Domestic vigor ordains our leverage and radiance in the world.
  - Rule out both futile containment and slippery accommodation. Don't demonize or sanitize China. Don't cast it bellicose or benign.
  - Steer a steadfast course through both sunshine and storms. Summon Chinese self-interests. Without them, "carrots, sticks and spinach will count for little."
  - Maintain military strength and keep our alliances strong. Bolster ties with other rising nations as ends in themselves but also for insurance.
  - Finally, do not squander our financial and psychological resources on foolhardy expeditions and quixotic nation-building.
2. One Korean participant described an equally mixed and "complex" ROK relationship with China. On the one hand, China had been South Korea's leading trade partner for the past eight years. There was thus an "economic logic" to the relationship. On the other hand, there are seven areas of potential conflict between the two countries:
- First, South Korea now has a large trade surplus. What if this changes as China's growth rate slows?
  - Second, Korea has its own "history issue" with China. Chinese history books describe the ancient Koryo dynasty in Korea as having been part of China, a view that Koreans reject.
  - Third, there is a conflict over values. The ROK is a democracy.
  - Fourth, there is the North Korean nuclear issue. China is perceived in the ROK as one-sidedly supporting the DPRK.

- Fifth, there are territorial differences, especially concerning the exclusive economic zones of the two countries.
  - Sixth, there are differences over the ROK alliance with the United States. The Chinese consider this alliance as “not suitable” for the present era and as a heritage of the Cold War. Beijing is particularly unhappy with the Lee Myung-bak Administration, which has gone further than the preceding ROK Administration to strengthen ties with the United States.
  - Finally, there are differences over the potential reunification of Korea.
3. Another Korean participant said that the year 2010 had been an important turning point in ROK-China relations. That was the year in which North Korea engaged in two provocative actions against South Korea—the sinking of the Cheonan and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island. China, he said, took the North Korean side on these provocations. This had a “deep impact” on South Korean public opinion. Public opinion polls now show that 70 percent of the ROK public see China on the North Korean side and consider this as the single biggest threat to South Korean security. Young people in Korea, the participant continued, are now even more anti-Chinese than they are anti-Japanese. Indeed, a majority of Koreans are now willing to ally with Japan, Korea’s traditional adversary, because of the perceived enmity from China.
  4. Several Japanese participants also described a mixed Japanese relationship with China. One Japanese participant predicted that China would continue to be “assertive” and said that the U.S. would need to exercise leadership against Chinese assertiveness. Another Japanese participant said that Japan was now expanding ties with India, Australia and Southeast Asian countries in what he called a “zone defense” against China in contrast to the previous “man to man” defense.

5. Each side had veiled—and sometimes not so veiled—criticisms of the other countries’ policies towards China. One American participant said that Koreans needed a new strategic logic in thinking about China. Too many Korean analysts now think of ROK relations with China and the United States in zero-sum terms—i.e. relations with one of the two big powers must necessarily come at the expense of relations with the other. Another American participant said, along similar lines, that the ROK was dragging its feet on trilateral security cooperation with the United States and Japan because of fear of alienating China.
6. Japanese and Korean participants, on the other hand, worried about the credibility of U.S. security guarantees in the face of rising China power.
7. All three allies seemed to be looking at China through different lenses. The United States, a global power, looked at China as a potential partner in resolving global challenges. Japan focused on its maritime and territorial issues with China and the potential for regional competition. The ROK, on the other hand, was centered on its North Korea problem and saw China largely in terms of how it played its North Korea “card.”
8. Several participants observed that in view of these differing perceptions, the three allies needed to come up with a joint statement concerning their strategic goals in the region.

## IV. Conclusions

The major themes of the meeting can be summarized in the following manner.

- There was a shared sense of the value of trilateralism among the U.S., Japan and Korea.
- There is a common view that North Korea remains the most dangerous near-term threat and flashpoint.
- There is a shared sense that China has the potential to be a threat, and considerable uncertainty about China's future direction—a concern that has been reinforced by the Bo Xilai scandal, China's mixed signals on North Korea, and a general lack of transparency on the part of China's leaders about the PRC's military expansion, territorial ambitions, and attitudes towards reform and democratization.
- Despite shared values and concerns, the U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral relationship is plagued by continuing Korea-Japan enmity and the inability of the two to separate historical baggage from their shared strategic predicament.
- Not only has this problem not gone away, recent Japanese and South Korean actions have served to exacerbate it.
- There is lingering concern (mostly among Japanese, but to some extent among Koreans) that the United States may be inclined to take actions that would, in effect, accept the DPRK as a nuclear weapons power for a long time to come.
- Base-related issues remain a problem in the U.S.-Japan relationship, despite the ability of the U.S. and the Japanese to separate the Futenma problem from the redeployment issue.

- The U.S.-Japan relationship is also troubled by Japan's inward focus, its political deadlock, and a lack of strategic vision among many leaders in the DPJ.
- There are lingering concerns among Americans that the December presidential election in the ROK could result in a victory by the center-left, which has made a point of noting its opposition to the KORUS FTA and to the current U.S approach in dealing with North Korea. Such a victory could greatly complicate U.S.-ROK ties, even if the Left has been chastened by the problems in the relationship caused by the previous Roh Moo-hyun administration.
- China remains a looming problem, with all parties hoping to build better ties with Beijing but troubled by China's actions and rhetoric in the South China Sea, East China Sea, and on historical issues.
- No one wants a confrontation with Beijing; no one wants to "choose" between the U.S. and the PRC; but all are wary of China's future path, troubled by rising Chinese nationalism, and disturbed by Beijing's rising military power.
- The U.S. "pivot" has been welcomed, but there are questions among our partners about our ability to sustain it and even greater concern about the direction of American politics and the irresponsibility of our Congressional leadership.
- There is a shared sense that the Taiwan situation is now the most stable it has been in decades and that the flash points now are the South China Sea and other maritime issues as well as the Korean peninsula.

## APPENDIX A

### THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE ON AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY (NCAFP) PRESENTS

### “REGIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES IN NORTHEAST ASIA”

MONDAY, MAY 21ST AND TUESDAY, MAY 22ND, 2012

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