



## **The National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP)**

### **A U.S.-Japan-Russia Trilateral Conference March 5, 2019**

**By Stephen Whittaker**

A delegation from the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) participated in a U.S.-Japan-Russia Trilateral Conference in Moscow on March 5, 2019. We were pleased to be hosted by Ivan Timofeev and the Russian International Affairs Council in cooperation with Ambassador Kenichirō Sasae and the Japan Institute of International Affairs.

The conference was the fourth gathering in this format, with previous meetings in New York City in 2016 and 2018, and Moscow in 2017. Under the banner of the “Russia-Japan Exchange Year,” the conference aimed to identify areas for mutually beneficial cooperation in the Asia-Pacific and to assess the impact of the U.S.-Japan alliance on Japanese relations with Russia, the role of shifting regional dynamics on trilateral relations, and current developments on the Korean Peninsula.

## **Introduction**

The fourth meeting of the U.S.-Japan-Russia Trilateral came at a particularly apt time in the relationship between the three participating nations. With the U.S. Administration facing strained relations with Russia, continuing trade tensions with China, and unsettled relations on the Korean Peninsula, 2019 is an important time to discuss where our interested parties stand, and where they might be able to cooperate to alleviate tensions. The U.S.-Japan alliance remains a stalwart component of the security and trade architecture of Northeast Asia, and it has informed more than half a century of American and Japanese action in the region.

In December 2018, political leaders in Russia and Japan met to sign a memorandum establishing a new Japan-Russia Parliamentary Friendship Association to enhance their cooperation across a range of issues. Key areas they hope to address include the development of enhanced economic cooperation, facilitation of a new visa regime between the two countries and the furtherance of sister city relationships. Of particular note is this group’s focus on the resolution of the Kuril Island/Northern Territories dispute that has served to thwart effective bilateral cooperation since the end of the Second World War. Externally, though U.S.-Russia bilateral relations remain tense, some hope that effective cooperation on a bilateral level between Russia and Japan will open doors for broader regional cooperation.

The continuation of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) presents just one area of concern for the Trilateral participants that can be shaped as either a regional challenge or opportunity. The BRI engages with regions that have been the historical domain of the United States, Japan, and Russia (among many others). There is a need to develop a clear understanding of China’s practices and intentions associated with this initiative alongside separate development and security strategies

characterized as “Indo-Pacific” in nature. A notable parallel to China involves ongoing quadrilateral cooperation between the United States, Australia, India, and Japan.

The Trilateral Conference also came on the heels of the Hanoi Summit meeting between North Korean Chairman Kim Jong-un and U.S. President Donald Trump. This Summit meeting provided important context for the Trilateral Conference, as Chairman Kim and President Trump cut short their time in Hanoi and departed without reaching an agreement or furthering progress made at the Singapore Summit in 2018.

## **The U.S.-Japan Alliance in Regional Context**

### ***Japan and the Security Guarantee of the United States***

The participants in the trilateral opened their discussions by largely agreeing that the U.S.-Japan alliance has served as the cornerstone of their bilateral relations for many decades. In addition, it exists as a key component of the security architecture of Northeast Asia. Still, a Japanese participant framed this relationship, in addition to other historically influential alignments in the region, as being in flux. As the triangular relationship between the United States, Russia and China has shifted, one participant argued, so too should Japan’s role.

With the prospect of a *bona fide* Russia-China alliance unlikely given China’s primacy in terms of economics and regional strength, the door is open for Japan to take advantage of warming Sino-Japanese relations to advance its regional goals. It was suggested that Russia would always play the junior partner to China in any Asian strategic calculus; however, one must recognize that Russia and China maintain a strong relationship, and the United States could not be easily replaced by Japan in security terms. As noted by an American participant, the U.S.-Japan alliance contributes substantially to stability in Northeast Asia. Not only does it exist for defensive purposes, but also for deterrence and reassurance. Importantly, this element of reassurance contributes to easing concerns for both allies and adversaries. A Russian participant agreed, suggesting a reformatted U.S.-Japan relationship could destabilize the entirety of Northeast Asia, forcing tough choices regarding future alignments, nonproliferation commitments, and military expansion.

In recent years, Russia has played a key role in U.S.-Japan relations as well. A Russian participant noted that the low military profile of Japan has changed in the post-Cold War era. As U.S.-Russia relations remain strained, Japanese foreign and security policy has become more forward given the changing regional context. The Administration of Prime Minister Abe has pressed the development of Japanese security technologies to assert strength as an independent actor. Still, some participants offered that Japan misses the larger strategic picture in favor of gaining tactical advantages. A Japanese participant pointed out that it would take hundreds of billions of dollars for Japan to replicate the U.S. security guarantee. Further, Japan’s expanding interest in security plays a role in negotiations regarding the Kuril Islands/Northern Territories. Russian concerns that Japan or the United States may be interested in establishing military bases in that region continue to be a sticking point.

### *North Korea and a Regional Arms Race?*

The conversation expectedly pointed to North Korea as a further area of concern for U.S.-Japan relations. An American participant succinctly laid out the threat that North Korea has posed to Japan for many years. Though protected by the nuclear umbrella of the United States, Japan voices substantial concerns about the expanding nuclear threat posed by North Korea. In opposition to a suggestion that Japan might opt to develop nuclear weapons, a Russian participant pointed out that the potential development of a Japanese nuclear program would prove to be no deterrent to North Korea. Still, some suggested that a breakdown or reimagining of the U.S.-Japan alliance might steer Japan in that direction.

Regarding a potential Japanese nuclear program, several Russian and Japanese participants agreed that though it might seem that such a program would be in Japan's short-term tactical interest, there are larger issues to consider. To develop such a program, in addition to being expensive, requires the buildout of varied facilities and capabilities beyond the capacity to build weapons. It is widely believed that such a program would destabilize Northeast Asia. The American participants were divided on this issue. One suggested that a nuclear hosting arrangement similar to Germany's might be an option for Japan. Another declared that decades of American policy has determined the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to be bedrock. To introduce additional nuclear weapons into Northeast Asia would be antithetical to U.S. policy since all current nuclear-sharing agreements precede the current NPT, and all American efforts with North Korea are driven by nonproliferation. If anything, they suggested, a conversation is possible regarding additional conventional arms that contribute to security in the region via the U.S.-Japan alliance.

The subject of conventional and nuclear arms arose against the backdrop of the planned withdrawals from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty). A Russian participant put forth that Japan is essential to the United States in terms of its strategic defense posture, and that Japan is complicit in violations of the INF Treaty. This resulted in a strong retort from both American and Japanese participants who explained that concerns about Russian violations have extended across several presidential administrations and treaty meetings. Russian concerns about American missile systems are documented, and have been addressed on the working level. Further, claims that the United States sought a treaty withdrawal as a response to Chinese proliferation are overblown. They only resolved to withdraw from the INF Treaty as a response to Russian violations.

An American participant brought the conversation back to basics by pointing out that more areas for friction than cooperation seemed to have appeared. They directed the participants to consider that relationships can remain productive and strong despite shifting policies and areas of tension. It is incorrect to assume that Russia and Japan are not consulted by the United States regarding policy action on North Korea, because there is ample evidence that they are. The same participant offered that perhaps Russia and Japan should be more deeply involved in talks with North Korea, not in the previous Six-Party format, but a new iteration. The warming of Russia-Japan relations, coupled with this productive involvement with the United States on a major policy issue will benefit all parties. It will take commitments and a willingness to be flexible, but relations stand to improve. Participants from all three countries agreed that in the context of Northeast Asia, there is ample room to ease tensions and cooperate.

## ***China and Rising Great Power Politics***

A Japanese participant identified strong sentiments of Chinese nationalism and exceptionalism as critical disruptive elements in regional relations. China maintains the belief that it can economically direct its near-neighbors through its powerful hold on regional trade and investment. This economic leverage creates challenges for nations such as Japan who are less beholden to China in economic terms. There is a broad perception that Japan, the United States and others seek to contain China. A Russian participant added that the American preoccupation with an Indo-Pacific alignment of nations does a disservice to the region. They continued by suggesting that the containment of China is driving the strategies of regional actors such as Japan and the United States.

Japanese participants strongly condemned any suggestion that it is the policy of Japan to contain China. On the contrary, Japan understands the importance of China as a regional actor, but wants it to better conform to international norms and rules-of-the-road. Further, they acknowledged that it might not be possible to contain China even if a nation wanted to. However, a Russian participant offered that while Japan does not actively work to contain China, the phenomenon of containment remains. From a theoretical standpoint, competition and the risk of conflict is endemic to relations between a declining hegemon and a rising power—in this case—the United States and China. As long as the role of Japan in the region remains linked to the United States, it will need to actively find ways to coexist with China, and to a similar extent, Russia.

There seemed to be agreement that outright conflict between any combination of the United States, Japan, Russia, or China was highly unlikely, despite grounds for confrontation between the United States and China in hypothetical terms. A Russian participant stated that Russia's spoiler attitude is less about making an effort to supplant global powers as it is to preserve Russian interests. An American participant agreed, noting that great power politics, while visible in the region, bare no signs of hard conflict. Engagement will be key in continuing to ease tensions and promote stability. The energy and economic sectors are essential in this engagement, particularly in bringing Russia and Japan together and continuing good economic practices across the region. Separately, Prime Minister Abe of Japan importantly resurrected the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), deepening economic cooperation and creating a model for effective regional engagement that the United States should consider rejoining.

## **Fitting the U.S., Japan, and Russia into Changing Regional Dynamics**

### ***Multilateral versus Bilateral Contexts***

Power shifts in Asia have made glaring disparities between pre-defined multilateral organizations and parallel bilateral forums more evident than ever. An American participant highlighted the need for new multilateral security contexts. The concurrent rise of China and India demonstrates a gap in defined formats, as the two seldom find areas in which to work with the United States, Japan and Russia collectively. The Trump Administration's preference for bilateralism creates further difficulties on this front, as there is a perception that nations belong to other organizations. These include the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), enhancing the interests of historically Eurasian nations, and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), consisting of nations vested in the liberal economic order.

A Russian participant noted that Russia maintains a distinct preference for a polycentric international order consistent with multilateral organizations. In this sense, Russia seeks engagement that works to balance China, the United States, and other regional actors. A Japanese participant offered that the SCO could provide a security forum by implementing observers or a “plus” format, interest in which was echoed by others. Importantly, noted a Russian participant, the Asia-Pacific region is split into Northeast and Southeast regions. Though the SCO as a means for cooperation is a possibility, the inherent lack of a standing multilateral forum for Northeast Asia will continue to be problematic. Southeast Asia maintains ASEAN, which has proven to be an effective forum. Some speculated that a revamped version of the Six-Party Talks, expanded in scope to include more than North Korean denuclearization, might provide a strong starting point for a parallel Northeast Asian organization. Most agreed that the establishment of structured, rules-based order is essential for the region.

### ***The Many Shapes of Economic Development***

One of the key features of the shifting regional dynamics in the region includes varied and often competing economic development strategies. At the forefront of these is China’s BRI. As pointed out by a Russian participant, the multidimensional goals of the BRI place it in a unique category of development strategies. Elements of the BRI feature heavily in localized economic development, trade policy, investment strategies, foreign policy and broad geopolitics. This places China firmly at the center of shifting regional dynamics, with a more limited role played by the perceived Indo-Pacific strategy pursued by nations such as the United States, Japan, India, and Australia. Russia takes on a balancing role with regard to BRI, seeking to influence the international order while remaining wary of Indo-Pacific designs.

The character of specific geographies is changing rapidly, according to an American participant. Central Asia, historically in the domain of Russia, features prominently as a component of the BRI and is witnessing prolific Chinese engagement in terms investment in various sectors including mining, infrastructure, and energy. Several Russian participants expressed an interest in having Russia engage with BRI in a constructive way. For example, one suggested a division of labor in Asia, with China providing economic guarantees, and Russia providing a security architecture. An American participant inquired whether there was a role for the United States to play in engaging cooperatively with BRI. Despite pushback, some believed that there is space for cooperation on the land-based side of the BRI since China generally respects existing rules and norms. However, a Japanese participant called attention to the fact that China totally disregards these on the maritime front. There is a true disconnect between China’s perception of rules when discussing land-based versus sea-based strategies. One participant proposed that the United States, Japan, and Russia might be able to work in concert to press China to adhere to maritime norms.

Another subject of discussion was the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). A Russian participant stated that there is great interest in the AIIB in Moscow to spur investment in the Russian Far East. Though neither nation is a member of the AIIB, both Japanese and American participants identified it as an area for cooperation with Russia. Notably, there was shared interest in the AIIB’s potential ability to promote adherence to accepted standards and norms in Northeast Asian lending and investment. By engaging the United States and Japan in the AIIB in lieu of the BRI, good governance practices can be pressed forward on the agenda and nations such as China can be held to account in a global forum for any documented malfeasance.

## *The Crucial Role of Nonproliferation in East Asia*

With the pending demise of the INF Treaty, only the New START Treaty remains as a verifiable means to limit arms between the United States and Russia. It provides a benchmark and excellent example of what is possible with dialogue and exchange even between nations with an adversarial history. American participants expressed their belief that extending New START can be a launching point for engagement with other nuclear-armed states. If the INF Treaty ultimately crumbles, areas for meaningful engagement in terms of nonproliferation will be essential. In furtherance of the NPT, working to contain the North Korean nuclear program can link Russian, Japanese and American interests. However, a Russian participant concluded that China remains on a course to continue shifting the political, military and economic balance of power in the region to its own ends. Thus, despite the best efforts of the United States, Japan, and Russia, discussions of nonproliferation, economic development or regional engagement will only become more complex.

## **Prospects for Cooperation on the Korean Peninsula Following the Hanoi Summit**

### *Grading the Hanoi Summit*

February 2019 saw North Korean Chairman Kim Jong-un and U.S. President Donald Trump meet in Hanoi, Vietnam to discuss denuclearization, easing of sanctions, and other issues. Considering that North Korea-United States tensions were exceedingly high at the start of the Trump Administration, it is notable that the Hanoi Summit was the second amicable meeting between the two leaders in just the last year. Though it ended abruptly, both Russian and American conference participants stated that Hanoi was neither a dramatic failure nor an implosion of relations. In fact, an American participant pointed out that it generated a rare example of positive press coverage in North Korea. Past international summits and meetings have generally been lambasted by internal news sources. Participants agreed that the mutual decision to step away from the negotiating table in Hanoi indicated that both leaders needed to revise their goals and consult at the working level before returning to the table. An American participant offered that there may yet be a Hanoi Part II that yields more concrete results now that each side knows what asks serve as a bridge too far.

A Russian participant cautioned that the lack of preparation going into the Hanoi Summit did not bode well for future success. Without concrete definitions, understandings, and policy goals set at the working level, there was never much hope for significant progress in Hanoi. Further, Hanoi demonstrated the risks of personal diplomacy and the challenges of dealing with multi-stakeholder issues on a bilateral level. By severing the United States from multilateral discussion formats and dealing with the Administration directly, North Korea has made a politically savvy move. Several participants from each country, however, urged a return, at least on a consultative level, to multilateralism in order to normalize the current negotiating process. An American participant stated that if the process is not normalized, even at a bilateral level, all parties risk a deterioration in relations should President Trump fail to win re-election. The process is also time-limited based on the political fate of South Korea's President Moon Jae-in. His support provides a key pillar of the continuing bilateral relationship between the United States and North Korea.

Looking forward, the outcomes of the Hanoi Summit are not abundantly clear; though not a failure, it is difficult to grade the meeting as a success. Channeling a unique optimism, a Russian participant suggested we consider what brought both parties to Hanoi. The United States saw an opportunity for a policy victory, and North Korea saw a means to lift sanctions. Both of these outcomes remain possible in future meetings, meaning efforts toward progress should continue to press on.

### ***The Future of the Korean Peninsula***

Issues revolving around North Korea present the most obvious road to cooperation between the United States, Japan, and Russia. However, concerns remain about what the future of the Korean Peninsula looks like in a world where North Korea moves closer to reconciliation with the South or makes progress in arms control talks. A Russian participant suggested that the United States, Japan, and Russia, with the addition of China should begin planning for a reshaped balance of power in Northeast Asia. A reconciled peninsula moving towards some measure of unification or cooperation is of concern to nations such as Russia and China. Should such a collaborative entity opt to align with the United States, this could be perceived as a threat to their interests. Further, a potentially denuclearized, or arms-limited, peninsula would see the United States step into a unique geostrategic position if they remained allied to a “united” Korea. These long-term concerns can be alleviated through measured dialogue and offering a consultative forum to China and Russia. It may help the current negotiating process if all interested parties are comfortable with a jointly-identified end goal.

Still, discussions of the future are not quite so simple. We are many decades from having any sort of reconciled or unified Korean Peninsula, and, as noted by an American participant, it will be a hugely expensive process for both sides. Demographics are changing in both North and South Korea, as a growing middle class asserts itself in the North Korean economy, and South Korean politics continually shifts. South Korea will also want its voice heard in conversations about the future of the region. A Japanese participant pointed out that South Korea is conspicuously absent from conversations involving the BRI and perceived Indo-Pacific designs, potentially offering more room for discussions of a regional realignment or the establishment of Korean neutrality. Japan also continues to have significant humanitarian concerns that will likely not be resolved in the near-term. These concerns will have to be addressed, in addition to the nuclear issue, if progress is to be made. While all recognized the merits of a forum to discuss the future of the peninsula in the short term, the resolution of numerous outstanding issues will be a long-term process.

In spite of pessimism regarding the length of the process, a cautious optimism led many participants to envision a unified Korea playing a substantial role in the region’s future. What level of unity can be attained is uncertain, but if positive progress is to be made toward that goal, an American participant pointed out, North Korea must take a big step forward in future negotiations to keep up momentum. Among the participants, the question of time, and who has it on their side, underscored the entire conversation. Given the stakes, particularly for the United States, Japan and the Korean Peninsula, it is incumbent on all interested parties, including Russia and China, to think quickly and creatively about how best to achieve progress in talks and what progress, or lack thereof, means for the future.