



A U.S.-Japan-Republic of Korea Trilateral Track II Conference

By Rorry Daniels

On November 16, 2019, the NCAFP co-organized with the Japan Forum on International Relations (JFIR) a U.S.-Japan-ROK Track II conference with delegations from the NCAFP, JFIR and the Korea National Diplomatic Academy (KNDA). Despite the difficult moment in which this meeting took place—in which Japan-ROK relations were described as the worst since the end of World War II—the heads of delegation emphasized the common values and interests shared by the three countries and the need to work together to preserve peace and stability. At the outset, it was put forth and roundly agreed by participants not to argue an official position but to use the flexibility inherent in the Track II process to imagine a path forward.

What follows is a summary of the discussion from the author’s point of view; the phrasing “participants agreed” is used for convenience to suggest the general direction of remarks and not to announce a unanimous consensus.

Executive Summary

The discussion revealed uncertainty and a high degree of pessimism about the prospects for trilateral cooperation in the short term, due to the interplay between broad geostrategic trends and domestic politics. Several participants asserted that the political leadership on all three sides were hardening into positions that would be counterproductive to trilateral cooperation. Another barrier to cooperation was the blending of human rights, trade, economic, and security issues, a trend that supports populism, nationalism, and zero-sum thinking; and one that is indicative of the changing nature of the globalization process from primarily cooperative to primarily competitive. While China’s regional behavior remained a cause of concern for participants from all three sides, the group was divided over whether China is attempting or could succeed in a strategy for regional hegemony.

Participants emphasized dialogue as a prerequisite to resolving problems and building mutual understanding in bilateral and trilateral relations. The two most consequential security challenges were the North Korean nuclear issue and the rise of China. Differences in policy toward these two issues were reflective of each side’s tactical considerations, not the strategic importance of the two trends. Dialogue, and not punitive action, was the most promising path forward both for Japan-ROK reconciliation and for assurance of a positive U.S. leadership role in the region. The main question for Japan-ROK relations was how to resume dialogue in the face of punitive actions and without a mediator or guarantor of any agreements that may be reached.

Many participants agreed that the Japan and ROK alliances with the U.S. were important mechanisms to ensure regional peace and stability and should be preserved, but that the stress on trilateral cooperation from poor Japan-ROK relations and reactions to a U.S. reassessment of alliance costs create the potential for fundamental changes in the alliance structure in the medium to long term.

Participants recommended that the ROK delay its decision to terminate the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) pending meaningful bilateral dialogue between the ROK and Japan. Specifically, there was broad agreement with a Japanese participant's suggestion to begin export-control talks between the ROK and Japan. Doing so could allow both sides to reset to the pre-July 1 measures. There are improvements both sides could make to increase export controls, including to strengthen compliance on sanctions against the DPRK, creating a positive-sum solution rather than continuing a downward spiral of retaliation.

All sides should continuously commit to a balance of power strategy that would allow China to rise without dominating the region. Many participants felt strongly that such a strategy requires the U.S. continue to play a regional leadership role, and recommended that the U.S. solidify this role by signaling deeper engagement in the region, including by sending high-level officials to important annual meetings and events.

The Changing Strategic Landscape in East Asia

A Korean presenter observed that the U.S. is fundamentally reshaping its relationship with China, but thought any trade tensions would not spill over into security confrontation. With China poised to continue its economic growth and military modernization, a greater U.S. presence in the region is a necessary balancing force. South Korea will be cautious in directly confronting China, but will support the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy because of its stake in maintaining the status quo and regional stability. A balance of power coalition will emerge in time, perhaps through the mechanism of the Quad (the grouping of the U.S., Japan, Australia and India). Meanwhile, all sides will have to deal with a North Korea that is unlikely to give up its nuclear program in full and will always see its neighbor to the South as an existential threat.

A Japanese presenter spoke about the current strategic landscape as an arc of broad trends. First, democratization, which almost every country in the region accepted in the 1980s and 1990s. Second, industrialization, a process in which many countries make the mistake of leaning on nationalism to endure a period of deep socioeconomic change. And third, economic integration including the web of trade deals and investment plans stretching over the region.

The interest of all three sides—the U.S., Japan and the ROK—is in working together and with like-minded partners to balance against China. The challenge to this strategy is two-fold: first, the Chinese are committing the mistakes of other industrializing powers, including those of Japan in the 1920's and 30's. China's sheer size makes the effects of those mistakes more consequential for the broader region. Second, the U.S. and others tend to look down on new democracies as immature partners when those countries want to be treated as equals.

An American presenter outlined four potential futures for East Asia, warning that the long peace enabled by U.S. regional leadership may be coming to an end: first, a unipolar, Sino-centric order that demands deference from other countries; second, a bipolar U.S.-China condominium arrangement (Chimerica); third, a bipolar clash between the U.S. and China that forces countries to take sides; and finally, a multilateral rules-based order.

The first three scenarios would face serious obstacles: a Sino-centric order has no attraction in the region; and neither a condominium or some version of a “new Cold War” is likely because the U.S. is not likely to either endlessly accommodate Beijing’s expansion of interests or be able and willing to completely decouple the two largest economies in the world. Therefore, all signs point to the multilateral, rules-based order as the arrangement that is most likely to endure. The lack of regional architecture in East Asia to foster and protect such an order remains a challenge but mutual interest on non-traditional security threats such as climate change, pandemics, etc., will continue to push countries toward cooperation.

The ensuing discussion revealed considerable agreement and optimism about the incentives for cooperation, but pessimism on whether the domestic environments in any of the countries concerned create political will for cooperation over confrontation. The U.S. is no longer seeking a global leadership role on trans-national issues or in multilateral organizations. China is not seeking a leadership role that would include providing global public goods. The question of whether it is still possible to discuss international relations at the level of the nation-state was raised—does the world move based on the personalities and decisions of the top leadership in each country, or because of the shifting interests of the masses of people they represent?

Discussion on the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy focused on encouraging clarification of its inclusive nature, but some criticism of its scope as being too narrowly focused on military/security and maritime issues at the expense of regional needs for economic development and attention to the specific needs of continental Southeast Asia. Participants, however, largely agreed with an American speaker who posited that the enduring strategy for the region is to prevent any one country from achieving hegemony. The key to doing so is figuring out what tools are available to manage China’s economic dominance such that other states can maintain sovereignty and prosper .

Prospects for Trilateral Cooperation

While the logic of trilateral cooperation is obvious, dialogue has become more difficult, particularly following threatened ROK withdrawal (at the time of this conference) from the GSOMIA agreement. An American speaker cautioned that South Korea and Japan should not count on the U.S. to mediate or force a decision on the GSOMIA issue, despite tremendous criticism in DC at the Trump administration’s decision not to intervene. At this moment, and given the leadership in all three countries, it may be more useful for groups such as the one assembled for this conference to bolster areas of positive interaction, rather than attempt to “solve” the areas where negative interaction is likely to persist. Widening the scope of trilateral

cooperation to address global issues such as maritime piracy, nuclear nonproliferation, cyber security, economic development, medical research (especially since many countries in Asia are aging societies), climate change, women's empowerment, quality infrastructure, energy security and demographic challenges; all require greater people-to-people exchanges that could move the political calculus over time toward greater cooperation on the thornier issues.

A Korean speaker followed by explaining that the ROK does have a deep interest in the rules-based order, often highlights the link between development and human security, and has been a leader in Asia-Pacific security exercises, including piracy and counter-terrorism. The question is how to link all the trilaterals and minilaterals focused on functional cooperation into a broader security architecture that would be less hijacked by bilateral points of contention. An additional challenge is how to participate in such a structure while maintaining a balance between the U.S. and China. Any middle-income country in the region would want the eventuality of being forced to take sides between the two major powers to be addressed in a framework that accounts for geostrategic competition.

A Japanese presenter was encouraged by the optimistic direction of the discussion but cautioned that political attitudes in Japan were hardening against compromise of any sort with the ROK government, which is increasingly viewed by moderates in the ruling party as both responsible for starting this round of bilateral tensions and insatiable in its demands that Japan be punished for its occupation and wartime atrocities. The strategy of waiting out the Moon government seems to be predominant. However, the presenter thought that Japan could improve the situation by focusing more of its attention on the Korean Peninsula—making space in Japan's global strategy for the vision of peace and prosperity desired by the ROK government. Trilateral security cooperation remains vital, but the framework of trilateral cooperation cannot accommodate the political objectives of either the ROK progressives or the Japanese conservatives.

The remainder of the group discussion focused on two issues: first, how to either prevent or manage the termination of the GSOMIA agreement; second, how to explain and promote the value of trilateral cooperation so that similar incidents do not continuously arise.

On the latter issue, an American participant noted that while history issues are divisive, they remain an important topic for dialogue and consultation; one that does not disappear if left unaddressed. Japanese and Korean participants agreed, but were also pessimistic that the two sides could agree at this point on what needs to be done to resolve the issues permanently. A Korean participant noted that although the ROK considers the history issues relevant and serious, it has rejected calls from China to jointly gang up on Japan. Instead, participants made the case that bilateral and trilateral cooperation can and should be based on the common political system and values shared by all three sides. There is also the issue of governance of new technologies and in the digital economy. Japanese officials see the ROK as an important partner in this emerging area.

But the immediate obstacle to cooperation is the series of tactical moves that brought the ROK and Japan to the brink of dissolving GSOMIA. This problem set follows a broader trend in international relations to mix the use of economic, political and security leverage in pursuit of

resolutions to bilateral disputes, compounding the amount of national interests involved in ‘untying the knot.’ In which issue set—economic, security, political—should de-escalation start and how can both sides save enough face to carry forward a reconciliation process into the other areas?

A Japanese participant suggested that the two sides formally start export control talks with a common understanding that both sides can improve sanctions enforcement. Participants roundly agreed and seconded this proposition, filling in some potential points of discussion for a new round of talks: the Korean export control office is considerably understaffed compared to the Japanese office, with a handful of officials on the Korean side and over 100 on the Japanese side; however, Japan also needs to strengthen the legal basis on which it can enforce sanctions, including on how to interdict ships at Japanese harbors suspected of transporting illicit goods. What was important, in the minds of the participants, was not only the outcome of such discussions but the tone with which they would be proposed—as an opportunity for self-criticism and rectification rather than an attack from one side to the other; and the signal they would send to regional actors and their respective publics about the maturity with which the leadership on both sides can manage a difficult bilateral relationship while pursuing their own national interests.

(The NCAFP took this idea to Seoul and presented it to officials. Later that week, export control talks became the basis of an ROK announcement to suspend the decision to end the GSOMIA agreement, pending further consultation with Japan.)

North Korea

Comments on North Korea wove their way through all conference discussions but essentially boiled down to the following points: Japan, South Korea and the U.S. all share a common concern about North Korea’s nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles programs. They are a threat to regional peace and security, and more importantly, remain an existential threat to Japan and the ROK. Something must be done to change the trajectory of current events. The differences between the three sides—beyond issues of bilateral contention with North Korea such as family separations, abductees, or returning the remains of U.S. soldiers who died in the Korean War—are over how best to persuade or coerce North Korea into giving up its nukes and its threatening behavior.

Participants seemed convinced that the bilateral process of diplomacy with the DPRK started in 2018 would continue; the U.S. and ROK want to work closely together on shaping North Korea’s decision-making environment and Japan is ready to aid in this process at an appropriate time, if its concerns can be met. All three sides agree that China’s cooperation is needed to shape North Korea’s decision-making environment, but have little leverage to influence China’s buy-in to the current process. A Korean participant said that the ROK must be careful not to provoke China at this delicate stage, but that this should not be interpreted as tilting toward China or downplaying the strategic challenge of a rising China.



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A U.S.-JAPAN-REPUBLIC OF KOREA TRILATERAL TRACK II CONFERENCE

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