

Leif-Eric Easley, "Meeting High Expectations: New Leadership and Upgrading U.S.-Japan-South Korea Relations," *JoongAng Daily* (with *International Herald Tribune*), January 11, 2008; *IHT-Asahi Shimbun*, January 9, 2008; *China Post*, January 12, 2008; *OMNI*, January 14, 2008.

Lee Myung-bak won the South Korean presidential election on December 19, raising expectations for Seoul's relations with Tokyo and Washington. Lee's victory guarantees a change in tone, but increased cooperation with Japan and the United States will not be automatic. While South Korea assembles its new administration, Japan and the U.S. should also prepare for upgrading relations.

Trilateral relations struggled under recent combinations of leaders. Former Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi drew criticism from Asian neighbors for his visits to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine. Japan-South Korea ties were strained by disputed history texts and competing claims to the Dokdo/Takashima islets. Koizumi's successor, Shinzo Abe, was a crusader against North Korea's abduction of Japanese citizens and led a strong response to Pyongyang's nuclear test – efforts that conflicted with Seoul's softer approach. Abe also prioritized restoring Japanese national pride and appeared insensitive on historical matters such as the suffering of women under wartime sexual servitude. Abe's successor, Yasuo Fukuda, has deliberately taken a more conciliatory approach.

In similar fashion, the Bush administration has moved from confrontation with North Korea toward give-and-take diplomacy. Six-party Talks have not met an optimistic schedule for a complete nuclear declaration by December 31. But Ambassador Christopher Hill has succeeded in building five-party solidarity, and there is progress on disabling North Korea's main plutonium reactor. Difficult tasks ahead include permanently dismantling facilities, and accounting for fissile material, existing bombs and a suspected uranium enrichment program.

Against this backdrop, enter Lee Myung-bak, a pragmatic conservative who stresses the importance of South Korea's traditional alliances. Lee will likely focus attention where he carries a mandate – on revitalizing the economy. Ten years of prioritizing engagement with North Korea under Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun had the effect of reshaping threat perceptions in South Korea, so most inter-Korean projects will likely continue under Lee, and suggestions of regime change will be nonstarters. But where Roh avoided questioning North Korea on its nuclear programs and human rights abuses, Lee's administration promises to demand reciprocity and results.

There are, however, a number of wildcards in play before and soon after Lee takes office on February 25. The Roh administration may attempt to cement further deals with North Korea to bind Lee, whose reputation will be under fire by a financial scandal investigation. There are also internal challenges for Lee's Hannara-dang (Grand National

Party). While Lee won the presidential election handily, the primary race was hard-fought and factions have yet to reconcile. In April, National Assembly elections will decide whether Lee will enjoy legislative support for his policies.

In Japan, Fukuda appears a steady hand on foreign affairs, but his cabinet could fall on unresolved government mismanagement of pensions. Also, since the opposition Minshuto (Democratic Party of Japan) won control of the Upper House, the nation's legislature has been unable to agree on security policy. Legislation to create a Japanese national security council was shelved in December, following deadlock over a bill for renewing an important anti-terrorism mission of the Japanese navy. The refueling mission in the Indian Ocean will resume, only after a rare Lower House overruling of the Upper House along party lines.

Meanwhile, Americans will soon become preoccupied with their own presidential election. The Bush administration appears to have set policy for its last year in office, but hawks will point to North Korea's nuclear delays and South Korea's election and see both reason and opportunity to campaign for a harder line against North Korea. It is not clear how Pyongyang will respond to mixed signals from the U.S. or the new Lee administration.

To advance trilateral relations despite these unknowns, policymakers should prepare an agenda for overcoming history, connecting alliances and coordinating policy on North Korea.

Economic and political trends encourage leaders to delicately address history and pragmatically prioritize cooperation. South Korea has overcome the legacies of war to achieve hard-earned democracy and prosperity. Japanese leaders have come to respect South Korea's importance and appreciate shared values with both American and Korean societies. The difference between South Korea's election last month and that of five years ago suggests that government legitimacy now rests on economic growth and consolidation of democratic institutions, rather than on ethnic nationalism or historical resentment.

South Korea no longer needs a victim's national narrative as it competes and cooperates at the highest international standards. Tokyo can now demonstrate it deserves South Korea's trust by being sensitive to historical issues while articulating the path of Japan's military normalization and proactive diplomacy. The path for improving bilateral relations includes resuming annual summits, discussions of exclusive economic zones and a free trade agreement, and increasing civil society exchanges.

Despite being connected by history, geography and strategy, the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-South Korea alliances are not sufficiently coordinated for meeting international challenges. The three militaries could combine certain training exercises, coordinate relief deployments for natural disasters, and explore complementarities for peacekeeping and reconstruction efforts. The three governments could deepen contingency planning

and develop shared visions of North-South Korean reconciliation, East Asian regional integration, and China's international role. A trilateral security declaration may be desirable, along the lines of the 2007 Japan-Australia Joint Declaration.

In December, Japan and the U.S. successfully renegotiated alliance finances. Burdensharing and basing arrangements are difficult to update, however necessary. It is important that allies negotiate in good faith and promptly implement agreements. Doing so requires political will and clear communication with publics about the value of alliances. Washington should consult closely with Tokyo and Seoul on the roles and missions each prefers to contribute toward international security. Japan may decide it is willing to cooperate on missile defense beyond its homeland, and South Korea may decide to join the Proliferation Security Initiative.

Six-party Talks must avoid backsliding by North Korea during the transition of South Korean leadership. U.S.-Japan-South Korea policy coordination is a necessary condition for holding North Korea accountable for denuclearization. First, North Korea should not be allowed excuses (such as delays of promised aid) for stalling the six-party agreement. Second, South Korea and the United States should push North Korea to meet Tokyo's demands for transparency about the fate of abductees, while Japan's leaders ensure that this emotive issue does not trump Japan's national interests in multilaterally addressing Pyongyang's nuclear programs. Third, regular meetings of the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) should be resumed so that Seoul, Tokyo and Washington stay on the same page in dealing with North Korea.

In 2008, if Pyongyang continues down the path of nuclear dismantlement, economic aid and political recognition will need to be delivered in stages along the way. If North Korea fails to meet its commitments, coordinated pressure will be necessary. Either way, U.S.-Japan-South Korea cooperation will be essential.

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