

Rebooting the Virtual Alliance

Toward a U.S.-Japan-ROK Security Partnership

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Issues and Insights, Vol. 7, No. 13 (August 2007), pp. 45-49.¹

With new leadership on the horizon, it is time to revisit the idea of a "virtual alliance" among the United States, Japan and South Korea.² Existing studies have well articulated the benefits of greater U.S.-Japan-ROK cooperation and have addressed why South Korea-Japan relations retain elements of antagonism despite shared strategic interests.³ The United States is clearly focused on upgrading its alliance relations with both Japan and South Korea, but must also look to realize the potential of trilateral cooperation. Obstacles to such cooperation can be overcome with the management of historical issues between Japan and South Korea, and mutually reinforcing upgrades of the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK security partnerships with coordination of policy on North Korea. This paper addresses challenges and opportunities in these areas and concludes with specific recommendations for building trilateral cooperation.

Overcoming History⁴

The South Korea-Japan relationship is strained by historical issues including textbook coverage of war and colonization, official apologies to comfort women who suffered under sexual servitude during the war, competing claims to the Dokdo/Takashima islets, and high-level visits to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine honoring Japan's war dead. The United States has generally steered clear of involvement in these issues, instead stressing the importance of good relations. Washington cannot

¹ This paper was prepared for the Pacific Forum CSIS conference, "U.S.-Japan-ROK Relations for the 21st Century," Honolulu, Hawaii, April 16-18, 2007. The author was asked to present points made in articles published shortly before the conference; sections that reprint previously published text are so noted and used with permission.

² See Ralph A. Cossa, ed., *U.S.-Korea-Japan Relations: Building toward a "Virtual Alliance"*, CSIS, 1999; Tae-hyo Kim and Brad Glosserman, *The Future of U.S.-Korea-Japan Relations*, CSIS, 2004.

³ James L. Schoff, *Tools for Trilateralism: Improving U.S.-Japan-Korea Cooperation to Manage Complex Contingencies*, Potomac Books, 2005; Victor D. Cha, *Alignment Despite Antagonism: the United States-Korea-Japan Security Triangle*, Stanford University Press, 2000; Gilbert Rozman and Shin-wha Lee, "Unraveling the Japan-South Korea 'Virtual Alliance': Populism and Historical Revisionism in the Face of Conflicting Regional Strategies," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 46, No. 5 (October 2006), pp. 761-784.

⁴ This section draws from Leif-Eric Easley, "Steps Toward the Future Instead of the Past: Improving Relations between Japan and South Korea," *JoongAng Daily* (with *International Herald Tribune*), September 8, 2006, page 7; and Leif-Eric Easley, "Devils in the Details: Effective policy, not disputed history, should be focus of national leaders," *JoongAng Daily* (with *International Herald Tribune*), April 9, 2007, page 7.

force historical reconciliation between Seoul and Tokyo and the U.S. government should not attempt to give history lessons in East Asia.⁵ But American civil society and former U.S. officials can advocate more moderate and productive approaches to history.

Early 20th century Japan was a country that built a military for regional domination. This military engaged in unspeakable atrocities across East Asia, also bringing suffering upon the Japanese people. Such history cannot and should not be forgotten. But it should be recognized that for 60 years Japan has been a peaceful and generous nation, focused militarily on self-defense and regional stability while providing the impetus and foreign aid for regional economic development. Japan today looks nothing like it did in the 1930s; it poses no threat of invasion to its neighbors and is a responsible and contributing member of the international community.

South Korea overcame the terrible legacies of war to achieve its hard-earned democracy and economic prosperity. Americans can encourage Tokyo to respect South Korea's importance and fully appreciate the shared values of Japanese and Korean societies. At the same time, Seoul can be encouraged to base government legitimacy on the consolidation of democracy and further economic development, rather than on ethnic nationalism and a regional history of suffering and resentment. A successful country by numerous global measures, South Korea no longer needs a victim's national narrative. A rivalry with Japan over semiconductors or on the soccer field is healthy, but overemphasis on a tragic past is not. For its part, Japan needs to demonstrate it deserves South Korea's trust. Tokyo must be sensitive to historical issues and clarify the path of Japan's normalization and assertive diplomacy.

The U.S. government could help Seoul and Tokyo rise above historical disputes by facilitating an agreement between the next South Korean president and the Japanese prime minister along the lines of that between Kim Dae-Jung and Keizo Obuchi.⁶ Disputed historical details (degree of coercion of comfort women, extent of Korean collaboration with Japanese imperialism, etc.) would be left to joint historical studies by civil society groups. The governments of Japan and South Korea would pledge to stay above the fray on these issues in the interest of bilateral cooperation and successful transformation of alliances with the United States.

⁵ For examples why, consider the strain on U.S.-Japan relations caused by the pending U.S. House of Representatives resolution on the "comfort women" issue. Putting aside the normative question of whether Japan deserves such censure or whether such signaling from the U.S. Congress is appropriate, in pragmatic terms the pending resolution has thus far produced negative interaction effects but no positive steps for reconciliation.

⁶ See the Japan-ROK Joint Declaration "A New Japan-Republic of Korea Partnership towards the Twenty-first Century," October 8, 1998, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/korea/joint9810.html>.

Alliance Transformation and Coordination on North Korea⁷

Rather than being overwhelmingly focused on North Korea and the Soviet Union respectively, the U.S.-ROK and U.S.-Japan alliances are in a process of transformation to address new challenges for regional stability and global security.⁸ Washington must continue to consult closely with Seoul and Tokyo on how U.S. leaders conceptualize the alliances within a global strategy, carefully considering the roles and missions South Korean and Japanese leaders envision for their own countries. As both alliances continue to support and are supported by the forward deployment of U.S. forces, essential adjustments to burdensharing and basing arrangements will require sustained attention and efforts by leaders on all sides.

The U.S.-ROK and U.S.-Japan alliances are linked by geography and history such that comparisons are inevitable as both alliances are upgraded. Those comparisons need not be negative. Instead, the alliances can learn from each other on the key transformational issues of roles and missions, burdensharing and basing. The more security coordination among the three countries, the more efficient and effective the alliances will be. An immediate and essential policy area for such coordination is vis-à-vis North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

The on-again, off-again Six-Party Talks recently produced an action plan for the early stages of North Korean denuclearization.⁹ The Feb. 13 statement was welcomed by Seoul and marked the resumption of South Korean economic and humanitarian aid to the North. Japan appears skeptical of the agreement. Tokyo has made clear it will not lift sanctions on North Korea or extend economic assistance until Pyongyang takes further steps, including accounting for abducted Japanese citizens.

One need go back little more than a decade to recall a time when Seoul worried that Washington's engagement of Pyongyang was getting out in front of its own. For Japan, one need go back less than six years to when Prime Minister Koizumi looked to make a breakthrough in normalization talks by visiting Pyongyang. Nowadays, China and South Korea's policies on North Korea are frequently labeled 'soft' while the United States and Japan are considered to be pursuing a harder line. Beijing's stiff response to

⁷ The sections that follow draw from a longer study, Leif-Eric Easley, "Securing Tokyo's Positive Role in North-South Reconciliation: The Need for a Strong U.S.-ROK Alliance to Reassure Japan," *KEI Academic Paper Series*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (February, 2007), pp. 1-11.

⁸ For reference on the alliance transformation process, see Norman D. Levin, *Do the Ties Still Bind? The U.S.-ROK Security Relationship After 9/11*, RAND, 2004; Charles M. Perry, et. al., *Alliance Diversification and the Future of the U.S.-Korean Security Relationship*, Brassey's, 2004; "The United States and South Korea: Reinvigorating the Partnership," *Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies*, Vol. 14, 2004, available at <http://www.keia.org>; Bruce A. Wright and Mark O. Hague, "The U.S.-Japan Alliance: Sustaining the Transformation," *Joint Force Quarterly*, No. 44, Winter 2007.

⁹ See the "Initial Actions for the Implementation of the Joint Statement," February 13, 2007, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2007/february/80479.htm> and "Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks," September 19, 2005, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2005/53490.htm>.

North Korea's nuclear test and Washington's flexibility in reaching the Feb. 13 agreement challenge that conventional wisdom about national approaches to North Korea. What remains unchanged is the significant overlap in national interests shared by South Korea, Japan, and United States vis-à-vis North Korea.

Five-party solidarity is necessary to pursue North Korean nuclear dismantlement and U.S.-Japan-ROK policy coordination is the essential building block for meaningful and productive Six-Party Talks.¹⁰ Unfortunately, Tokyo and Seoul do not fully recognize their cooperative potential or adequately consider the concerns of the other. As the central actor in the Six-Party Talks¹¹ and the mutual ally of Japan and South Korea, the U.S. has the responsibility of improving policy coordination on North Korea. To realize this goal, what obstacles must Washington overcome?

First, Seoul needs to be convinced that North Korea is a legitimate security concern for Japan. Moreover, it is important that Seoul persuade Tokyo that the South's engagement of the North will not ignore Japan's security concerns. Diplomatically engaging rather than strategically isolating Japan will allow Seoul to reassure Tokyo that anti-Japanese ideology will not be used to bring North and South Koreans together. Tokyo can then be more politically and financially supportive of Seoul's vision for Korean reconciliation as Japanese strategic planners become confident that a unified Korea will not be antagonistic toward Japan or fall into the Chinese sphere of influence.

Second, Washington should impress upon Tokyo that it also has a responsibility for reassuring South Korea. Tokyo should credibly convey what "normalizing" means for its military doctrine and focus on building trust with South Korea by overcoming irritants in the relationship. Japan can make clear that effective trilateral coordination would make consideration of a unilateral deterrent unnecessary. Meanwhile, Washington should encourage Tokyo to stake out a position on the abduction issue that is not so uncompromising that it complicates incremental progress and feeds misperceptions that Japan is becoming diplomatically isolated in the six-party process.

Finally, Washington should press for resumption of regular meetings of the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) or an equivalent mechanism. Enhanced three-way communication on security issues would have the immediate task of coordinating incentives for North Korean nuclear dismantlement and credible consequences for Pyongyang's non-compliance. South Korea and Japan could also work

¹⁰ Leif-Eric Easley, "Changing North Korea's Nuclear Game Plan: five parties should pressure Pyongyang, then give it face to disarm," *JoongAng Daily* (with *International Herald Tribune*), Nov. 10, 2006, 7.

¹¹ Washington has been accused of "outsourcing" its North Korea policy to Beijing in the Six-Party Talks. This is inaccurate: the U.S. is still the actor each of the other parties is most concerned with consulting. While the talks have yet to achieve tangible steps toward disarmament and there was the negative development of North Korea's nuclear test, the involvement of all North Korea's neighbors, the heightened transparency of their North Korea policies, the increasingly constructive role of China, and the demonstration of five-party leverage are all positive developments.

together with the United States to revise and harmonize contingency plans concerning a possible North Korean collapse, incident at sea or missile attack.

Building Trilateral Cooperation

TCOG, or its successor, should not only focus on North Korea policy. The trilateral mechanism should be charged with broadening the foundation of U.S.-Japan-ROK cooperation, within the region and globally, concerning both traditional and non-traditional security issues. Key areas of trilateral coordination can include:

- Build mutual understanding about Japanese military normalization, the internationalization of the U.S.-ROK and U.S.-Japan alliances, regional integration efforts, engagement of China, U.S. global posture transformation, and South Korea's future vision for the Peninsula.
- Integrate efforts on deterring and dissuading terrorism, minimizing vulnerabilities of populations and key infrastructure, and addressing root causes.
- Combined training for natural disasters in the region, leading to coordinated deployments and emergency relief efforts in the event of a catastrophic earthquake or tsunami.
- Coordinate on base restructuring, plans for flow of forces, and civilian evacuation procedures.
- Study complementarities of U.S., ROK and Japanese forces for deployment in peacekeeping operations.
- Develop a trilateral strategy for international aid and investment for the development of the North Korean economy.
- Cooperate on standards and implementation for export controls and transportation security.
- Study a trilateral U.S.-Japan-ROK security declaration similar to the recent Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation.¹²

Progress in these areas will require the attention of Washington as the U.S. and its partners upgrade the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK alliances. Washington will also need to facilitate Tokyo and Seoul acting on a broad base of shared values and interests. While Japan still has ground to cover to respect South Korea as a security partner and earn its trust, Seoul needs to welcome Tokyo's indispensable role in promoting peaceful and economically feasible North-South Korean integration. Then not only will the U.S.-ROK and U.S.-Japan alliances continue to provide for stability in the region, U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral cooperation can make further contributions to security beyond East Asia.

¹² Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation available at <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/australia/joint0703.html>.