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Discussion Paper

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US-centered triangles: US – Japan – South Korea

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Trilateral Security Cooperation among ROK, US and Japan: Prospect and Challenges¹

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1 Introduction

As Kim Jong-eun's relentless pursuit of nuclear weapons development advances rapidly the security condition of Asia-Pacific is deteriorating sharply. Despite all the sanctions and pressure from the international society North Koreans have managed to succeed in conducting nuclear detonation tests six times and launching repeatedly a barrage of ballistic missiles including SLBM's and ICBM's. After the very recent sixth nuclear test in September of 2017, therefore, many experts come to conclude that the only thing left for North Koreans to demonstrate acquisition of ICBM-deliverable nuclear weapons is to launch an ICBM that flies fully its announced long range and detonates its mounted nuclear warhead(without actual fissile materials in it) successfully. This means that North Korea is now just one last single step short of becoming a nuclear capable state along with a delivery system of ICBM's.

Facing this rapidly increasing threat posed by North Korean nuclear and missile capabilities, a demand for united effort by all the countries surrounding the Korean Peninsula to pressure Pyongyang to come to a negotiation table for denuclearization is stronger than ever. Considering an unlikelihood of forming such a unity in near future as hinted by continuous reluctance of both China and Russia to join, however, a next option to be pursued first for now is to strengthen the trilateral cooperation among South Korea, the U.S. and Japan. As a matter of fact, there have been urges and attempts to increase a level of trilateral cooperation among these three for the past several years, but the result is not as satisfactory as it should be. Thus, this short paper aims at examining a possibility of strengthening the level of trilateral cooperation further. Before doing so, it will first review the history of trilateral relations among three countries briefly. And in the end, this paper will also make a few suggestions to enhance the trilateral cooperation.

2 A Brief Historical Review of the Trilateral Cooperation

South Korea and Japan resumed their official diplomatic interactions in 1965. There had been a few attempts to normalize their relation earlier, but it took two decades

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after South Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule for both governments actually to sign on a normalization treaty. Since then, however, an overall bilateral relationship between two countries has been rapidly and steadily improved until the end of the Cold War. It was so not only because of increasing shared economic interests and socio-cultural exchanges between the two countries but also because of the U.S. strategic interest in containing the Soviet communist bloc. In fact, during the Cold War era the trilateral relation among South Korea, the U.S. and Japan had been almost like a virtual alliance and so, a defining feature of the security order in Northeast Asia then was a structural confrontation between the southern triangle(South Korea, the U.S. and Japan) versus the northern triangle(North Korea, Russia, and China).

With the end of the Cold War the confrontation between two triangular relations loosened for a while, particularly in security areas. But as the issue of North Korean nuclear development raised a tension in the region again around early 1990's, the trilateral security cooperation strengthened again and became further institutionalized as the Defense Trilateral Talks (DTT) in 1994. The meeting was held at a deputy minister level and had lasted until 2002. In addition, the other deputy minister level meeting of the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) had been also established on the foreign affairs front in 1999 to cope with increasing threats from North Korean nuclear and missile development. The TCOG continued to convene till 2004 and then, replaced finally by the Six-party Talks.

The close trilateral cooperation in the early 2000's went sour during the Roh Moo-hyun Administration and the Koizumi Cabinet mainly due to highly sensitive history and territorial issues. After a short thawing period during the early years of the Lee Myung-bak Administration, the bilateral relation was deteriorated again and stayed frozen until 2015 when the Park Geun-hye Administration and the Abe Cabinet finally succeeded in reaching an agreement on one of the thorniest issues between two governments, i.e., the comfort women issue. Despite the difficulty in maintaining ordinary diplomatic relations, both bilateral (South Korea-Japan) and trilateral (South Korea-the U.S.-Japan) cooperation in security areas have been sustained continuously. For example, the Defense Trilateral Talks (DTT) which started in 2008 continue to be held till the present. The trilateral defense ministers' meeting in the Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore also has convened every year since 2009 till this year.

Because of a failure to sign on the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) in 2010, the bilateral cooperation between South Korea and Japan in security areas underwent a difficult time once again, but fortunately revived back to a normal tract with agreeing on the Trilateral Information Sharing Agreement

(TISA). As the nuclear and missile threats from North Korea continued to rise rapidly, the governments of South Korea and Japan finally signed on the GSOMIA in 2016 and regained a momentum to strengthen their bilateral security cooperation, mainly for deterring and defending against North Korean nuclear and missile threats. Moreover, unlike a concern about the current Moon Jae-in Administration's insistence on a more nationalistic stance towards Japan, the President Moon completed a successful summit meeting with the Prime Minister Abe and agreed to pursue a two-track policy that separates security from history issues during the G20 conference of July 2017 in Berlin. Therefore, both bilateral and trilateral relations in these days are not either very good or very bad, but sustain steadily a necessary level of cooperation at a low key.

On-going trilateral security cooperation among South Korea, the U.S. and Japan can be summarized into five groups. First, they maintain several regular channels of high level policy talks. As mentioned above, they include Defense Ministers Meeting in Shangri-la, Defense Trilateral Talks, Trilateral meetings among Chairmen of Joint Chiefs of Staff, and so on. Second, relevant armed forces of three countries participate together in trilateral and multilateral combined exercises and trainings in areas of search and rescue, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, anti-piracy, missile detection, anti-submarine operations, Blue Lightning, and etc. Third, policy coordination and consultation on North Korean nuclear threats are obviously an area of close trilateral cooperation these days. Fourth, three countries put more efforts on information sharing and dissemination through the GSOMIA and by linking to the networks like APIIN. Fifth, there are other educational exchange programs in a smaller scale for missile defense table top exercise, peace-keeping operations, and so on.

3 A Prospect for the Future of Trilateral Cooperation

Judging from the past experience, a prospect for the trilateral cooperation in the longer term is not so bad. Of course, there will be some ups and downs. But it is more likely to be strengthened because of shared values as well as strategic interests among three countries. However, a shorter term prospect is not so clear and assuring. So, we can say that there are positive factors that can facilitate the cooperation, while there are also negative factors that can hinder it.

3.1 Positive Factors

There are largely three factors conducive to enhancing trilateral cooperation among South Korea, the U.S. and Japan. First, it is a shared perception on North Korean threats. Among five surrounding countries of the Korean Peninsula, the three countries have a virtually same threat perception on North Korean nuclear and missile development, while China and Russia appear to have different ones. Some may have a different view on this by arguing that the U.S. also has a different threat perception than the other two because North Koreans do not fully master the ICBM technology yet. Or there can be others who argue that the ultimate goal of the U.S. is non-proliferation, not denuclearization of North Korea because the U.S., like China, considers the nuclear threat by North Korea as a manageable threat. These arguments, however, miss one important thing. That is, the U.S. should treat a threat to its allies as seriously as a threat to its own when the threat is nuclear in nature because it has committed to provision of the nuclear umbrella to its allies. Moreover, given the rapid and relentless advancement of North Korean nuclear and missile capabilities, a threat perceived by the U.S. now is not so much different from those perceived by South Korea and Japan. So, as a level of threat posed by North Korea increases, the felt-need for trilateral cooperation among three countries will also be intensified.

Second, it is a recent sign of movement toward improving the relation between South Korea and Japan. The President Moon and the Prime Minister Abe have already met twice this year, and as noted above, repeatedly confirmed that both of them would pursue a two-track policy separating security issues from history and territorial ones. As a matter of fact, both leaders know that those history and territorial issues are extremely important, and they have different views on how to solve them. But they also understand at the same time that their different views on such issues should not block a more future-oriented development of the relationship between two countries.

Third, American encouragement is another factor that accelerates the trilateral cooperation. Thus far, the U.S. has not taken any side between South Korea and Japan overtly. It has skillfully managed to keep a middle or neutral position on sensitive issues like comfort women and Dokdo/Senkaku island issues. On the security issues, however, the U.S. has actively urged and promoted both bilateral and trilateral cooperation whenever chances arose. These attempts are likely to be intensified further considering a recent emphasis by the President Trump on more role and burden-sharing by the allies for the regional security. If it is the case, the consequence will be an increase in bilateral cooperation between South Korea and Japan and also, the trilateral cooperation among South Korea, the U.S. and Japan.

3.2 Negative Factors

There are also mainly three factors that can hinder enhancement of the trilateral cooperation. First, it is strong negative national sentiments in both South Koreans and Japanese toward each other. For example, a survey conducted a few months ago in South Korea showed that almost 70% of South Koreans supported re-negotiation of the comfort women agreement with Japan. In fact, the Minister of Foreign Affairs set up a task force to review the agreement. On the other hand, many people in Japan also seem to have bad feelings toward South Koreans, too. As illustrated by an expression like “moving the goal post,” they think that despite their repeated apologies, South Koreans unfairly keep complaining about the lack of their remorse about their wrong-doings committed to South Koreans during the colonial rule. Without accurate understanding of their wrong-doings or serious contemplation of the contents of their apologies, many Japanese blame back South Koreans for not trying to reconcile sincerely. If these sentiments diffuse more widely and are imprinted more deeply in the general public’s minds of both countries, a chance of increasing cooperation will be very low.

Second, different strategic outlooks among the three on the region’s security order are a serious hurdle for promoting further the trilateral cooperation. Both the United States and Japan view China as an emerging threat to them. Namely, to them a rising China is a clearly common threat. For South Koreans, however, it is different. They do not consider China as a direct threat to them yet. Rather, South Koreans treat or want to treat China as one of their indispensable strategic partners for solving North Korean nuclear problems as well as achieving economic prosperity, while acknowledging a necessity of some hedging measures to prepare for a malignant rise of China. Besides, South Koreans consider the U.S. alliance is enough to defend and deter against North Korean attacks. Japanese, however, see a rising China as its regional rivalry as well as a challenger to an existing regional order by force. In addition, in these days Japanese appear to think more than one ally is necessary for its defense and security. In fact, Japan already started to pursue a trilateral strategic cooperation with Australia and India a few months ago. So, without a proper re-adjustment of such strategic outlooks among South Korea, the U.S. and Japan, their trilateral cooperation will not be so effective.

Third, China’s disruptive strategy is another factor that can hinder an increase of trilateral cooperation. The primary goal of China for now appears to be to reduce the presence and influence of the United States in the region and then, to acquire a regional hegemonic status for itself. To do so, although it is not so direct and explicit, from time to time China attempts to drive a wedge between South Korea and the United States. China’s retaliatory action against South Korea’s agreement on the U.S.

THADD battery deployment is one of such examples. By creating a situation which makes South Koreans hesitate to make a choice between the U.S. and China, China aims at portraying South Korea as a country to consider China more importantly than the U.S. While only a few times of such attempts would not weaken a close relationship like the ROK-U.S. alliance easily, its repetition can cause a slack and shake the trust in the alliance.

4 Suggestions for Enhancement of Trilateral Cooperation

To promote the trilateral cooperation further five suggestions can be identified. First, between South Koreans and Japanese words and deeds that can provoke the other side's national pride or historical wounds must be avoided or restrained. Unfortunately, sometimes the bilateral relation can be disrupted suddenly by imprudent politicians who use such sensitive issues for their parochial political gains. Other times, it can be a mass media which forget or ignore keeping impartiality in its reporting. Thus, unnecessary politicization of sensitive issues that may trigger the other's antagonisms should be prevented, and for that the most requiring virtue is prudence of leaders of both countries.

Second, a wise handling of routinized policy decisions by both South Korean and Japanese governments can help alleviate antagonisms against one another and improve each other's images. In fact, there are a series of governmental policy decisions that ought made regularly for both governments. For Japan, decisions like approvals of textbooks for middle and high schools, celebration of the Dokdo/Senkaku island day, and commemoration of war dead in the Yaskuni Shrine are such examples. For South Korea an annual exercise of defending Dokdo can be considered one of such examples. Since some of these decisions are mandated by laws, both governments cannot avoid making decisions on them completely. However, there can be ways to keep such decisions in low profiles, to reduce impact or implementation of decisions, or to postpone decisions as long as possible. Again, if such efforts are accumulated for several years, they will help enhance mutual understanding greatly and so, improve images of each other's.

Third, opportunities to work together in non-security as well as security areas should be pursued more actively. Areas of cooperation that can last longer and have more profound or wider impact are explored and pursued further. Joint ventures in defense industries, joint development of cyber protection, and co-production of films or plays can be such examples.

Fourth, efforts for public diplomacy should be strengthened to enhance mutual understandings of each other. In fact, for the last few years all three governments

recognized the importance of public diplomacy and so, enlarged their organs, budgets, and other pertaining resources to make their public diplomacy more effective. There are, however, still more room for improvement. For example, more emphasis can be put on listening to and understanding positions of others' rather than advertising one's own.

Fifth, existing mini- and multi-lateral forums or activities must be utilized more to build closer bonding and better understanding of each other, particularly between South Koreans and Japanese. Instead of creating new areas or nascent forms of cooperation, it would be far more efficient and feasible to explore and strengthen the existing ones. Thus, both governments should put more energy to identify such forums or activities and engage them more diligently. And, in this area, a facilitating role of the U.S. can be critical and should be encouraged more. After all, it is the United States that not only has superior power but also leads both alliances at the same time. So, it must play more a role of facilitating the bilateral cooperation between South Korea and Japan.