



U.S.-Japan-Korea: Creating a Virtual Alliance

by Ralph A. Cossa

Much has been written about the U.S.-Japan-China and U.S.-Japan-Russia trilateral relationships and their respective impact on the broader Asia-Pacific security environment. There is, however, another three-way relationship that attracts far less attention but which can have an equally far-reaching impact on regional security. I refer to U.S./Japan relations with the Republic of Korea today and with a unified Korea at some (unpredictable) point in the future.

Close security cooperation among Tokyo, Washington, and Seoul has already paid rich dividends in pressuring North Korea both to keep its Agreed Framework commitments and, at least temporarily, to abandon its missile testing program. The creation of the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) has helped to institutionalize this three-way cooperation, as least as far as dealing with Pyongyang is concerned. The challenge is to determine how best to bring the three sides even closer together in a way that serves all three nation's national security interests, while also taking the concerns of others (especially China and Russia) into account to ensure broader regional stability.

A formal, official trilateral security alliance does not appear to be a serious option either today or in a post-Korean reunification era. A two year study of U.S.-Korea-Japan relations [conducted by the Pacific Forum CSIS, Seoul's Yoido Society, and the Tokyo-based Okazaki Institute] generally concluded that, absent a clear and present threat, a formal three-party alliance is neither necessary nor advisable. The challenges involved in creating – and in gaining both public support for, and legislative approval of – a formal treaty would be daunting and, for Japan, would raise serious constitutional issues as well.

The creation of a “virtual alliance” is achievable, however, and in the interests of long-term peace and stability. This virtual alliance can be achieved through the maintenance of a reinvigorated U.S.-Japan alliance, the continuation of a solid U.S.-Korea security relationship post-unification, and the strengthening of bilateral security cooperation between Tokyo and Seoul.

The enactment of implementing legislation for the revised Defense Guidelines has gone a long way in reinvigorating the U.S.-Japan leg of the triangle. Still needed is well-reasoned public debate in Japan as to its future role and responsibilities, in order to allow Japan to be a more equal partner. The North Korean missile firing over Japan in August 1998 and last spring's incursion into Japanese waters by two North Korean spy boats have contributed to a general realization among the Japanese people that the end of the Cold War does not mean the end to challenges to Japan's security. Both these events have also opened the door for greater trilateral cooperation

among the U.S., Japan, and South Korea in dealing with the ever-persistent North Korean threat.

The ROK-U.S. alliance also appears on firm footing. ROK President Kim Dae-jung has stated that Korea's security rests on its ability first and foremost to retain its security relationship with the U.S., both today and post-reunification. The American security umbrella makes it possible for Seoul to simultaneously pursue close, cordial relations with its three giant neighbors: Japan, China, and Russia. Absent American assurances, Seoul would likely feel compelled to establish security links with one of its larger neighbors to the perceived detriment of the other two. This has proven to be destabilizing in the past and would likely have the same result in the future, especially if it resulted in a Sino-Korean strategic relationship seemingly aimed at Japan. Such links would injure Korean economic interests too, especially with Japan.

Of the three legs of the virtual alliance, Korea-Japan remains the weakest link. It is an unfortunate fact that one of the few things that the people of North and South Korea have in common is a well-earned sense of historic distrust for their Japanese neighbors. If future South-North ties are built on this factor, however, with Japan emerging as the common concern today and future threat tomorrow, this will put Korea on a collision course with the United States, whose national security strategy rests upon the foundation of close U.S.-Japan relations and greater Japanese involvement in regional security affairs (within the framework of the U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty and Japan's Peace Constitution).

Bold initiatives in the past two years by ROK President Kim Dae-jung and Japanese Prime Minister Obuchi have already gone a great way in overcoming the large emotional barriers to greater cooperation. While much remains to be done in improving public attitudes, a new-found spirit of cooperation now exists upon which to build a future friendship. What's needed now is a broader education campaign, vigorously supported by both governments, to overcome the suspicions, concerns, and general reluctance of both Koreans and Japanese to see one another as natural allies.

An old Russian proverb best sums up the current challenge: “forget the past and lose an eye; dwell on the past and lose both eyes.” The time has come for the people of Korea and Japan to approach the future with both eyes wide open.

As the Korea-Japan link strengthens and America's security ties with Tokyo and Seoul remain firm, the virtual alliance will naturally emerge and prosper, thus increasing the prospects for stability in East Asia.

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