

Because Countries Don't Have Therapists: Trust Issues and the US, Japan, ROK Trilateral Relationship

by A. Greer Meisels

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Ernest Hemingway wrote, "The best way to find out if you can trust somebody is to trust them." Straightforward advice to be sure, but in Northeast Asia – where trust is a rare commodity – this adage falls on deaf ears.

"Trust issues," the often unwanted children born from contentious histories, greatly contribute to tensions in Northeast Asia. Lingering grievances between Japan and its neighbors to debates over ownership rights of outcroppings of rocks, the mackerel that swim beneath the surface of the sea, make achieving a stable foundation of trust and the energy resources beneath the seabed seem unattainable.

Yet the US-Japan-ROK triangle is too important not to fight for. First, this trilateral configuration promotes burden sharing – a definite "plus" given the economic woes our respective countries face. Second, it raises awareness levels that both the US-Japan alliance and the US-ROK alliance are regional public goods – a fact that often gets lost.

Finally, though it might be okay for parents to tell their children not to care about what others think of them, the same doesn't hold true for supposedly like-minded countries with shared values. The optics that arise from in-fighting between the US, Japan, and the ROK are simply too bad to ignore; and they can undermine regional security.

Here are three ways to ameliorate trust issues.

Better communications

Some argue that dynamics between the US, Japan, and the ROK do not stem from a lack of trust per se, but from lack of communication about policy priorities. However, communication difficulties perpetuate trust issues.

Consider a DPRK contingency. From the US perspective, there are questions about whether Japan would allow Japan-based US forces, or its own armed forces for that matter, to be used for a military operation on the Korean Peninsula. Meanwhile, Tokyo worries that a shifting "red line" means that the US might allow certain missile or nuclear development programs to proceed unchecked that could undermine Japan's own security.

US policymakers also express concern over the intentions and objectives of South Korea's new "proactive deterrence" policy. This is due, in large part, to a lack of specifics from the

ROK government. This in turn triggers anxieties in Seoul about whether the US will restrain its freedom of action to deter or respond to future DPRK provocations.

A critical first step is to mitigate these uncertainties, which can then reduce mistrust. That demands more effective communication and participation in more robust intelligence sharing activities, improving military interoperability, clarifying roles and clearly articulating the division of labor in a DPRK contingency, and increasing the number of formal and informal trilateral dialogues to discuss these and other issues of concern.

Loosen the grip of politics

The year 2012 suffers from "election fever." The United States just re-elected President Obama to a second term while Korean presidential elections and Japanese general elections will be held in December.

Each of these elections could have a serious impact on domestic political dynamics and how each country relates to the others. But regardless of outcomes, no politician should (mis)use mistrust for domestic reasons or to shore up support. Short-term political gains will be erased if re-entrenched suspicions of "the other" leave political leaders without the ability to make future concessions for fear of appearing "weak."

Maintaining peace and stability should garner bipartisan support and should be creatively pushed forward no matter what party is in power. Politicians and policymakers in each country face similar security concerns including: the rapid modernization of China's military, the lack of clarity about the trajectory of China's rise, and a seemingly intractable nuclear threat posed by North Korea.

While playing the "Japan" or "Korea" card might benefit politicians, and protesting US decisions might galvanize "the base," they won't make these countries any more secure. In fact traditionally, the only country in the region that gains from discord among the allies is North Korea.

To be fair, more joint military exercises both within and outside Northeast Asia won't solve all the trust issues that besiege these three countries, but they could demonstrate to other actors (as well as to themselves) that they can and will cooperate on security issues and share strategic goals.

Don't forget that trust is earned

Public opinion is critically important. It played a deciding role in a series of recent strategic agreements, when just a few short months ago the proposed Japan-South Korea intelligence-sharing agreement known as the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) crashed and burned as a result of a public criticism and outcries in South Korea.

However, while public opinion is important, policy in the US, Japan, or the ROK shouldn't be held hostage by it. All three countries must prioritize strategic communications and public diplomacy, devoting more resources, time, and effort to public relations campaigns to build public support for trilateral cooperation.

There needs to be honest and open public discourse on sensitive security issues that have been avoided for fear of political backlash. South Korea's historical grievances with Japan are real and must be respected, but they should not overshadow national security interests. Japan needs a debate that discusses the broader topic of the alliance and Japan's role in maintaining peace and security in the 21st century.

Finally, the US must do a better job articulating its own strategy for East Asia and sharing it with its allies. Japan and the ROK follow closely discussions of US defense spending cuts and sequestration. They need to trust that the US will maintain a credible deterrent and will be able to "walk the walk" not just "talk the talk" should the situation warrant it.

So until we are able to get these three countries "on the couch," perhaps the best diagnosis one could offer is that the ties that bind the US, Japan, and the ROK together are stronger than those that threaten to decouple these links. The challenging aspects of this trilateral relationship should not be downplayed, but it is critical for the future security of the region that the leaders in all three countries not only earn the trust of their own people but also build trust with each other – since on balance, it is difficult to imagine that there are too many challenges in today's interconnected world that can be solved unilaterally, or that cannot be better addressed through cooperation.

In other words, the rationale for building trust exists. The question is whether leaders' resolve will follow.

For further reading on this subject, please refer to *Issues & Insights*, Vol. 12 No. 12 titled, "Mistrust in the US-Japan-ROK Triangle: Next Generation Solutions" [<http://csis.org/publication/issues-insights-vol-12-no-12>].

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