

Steps toward a US-Japan-ROK trilateral partnership by
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As 2014 closed, the United States, Japan, and the Republic of Korea signed a military intelligence accord concerning North Korea's weapons of mass destruction. Given the challenges in the Asia-Pacific security environment, trilateral cooperation between the three countries is ideal, logical, and essential. Yet, various regional and domestic challenges demand that much more be done to enhance this partnership.

The myriad challenges are well known. Brad Glosserman and Julia Cunico (in *PacNet* #6, "Trilateral cooperation in Northeast Asia: expectations and limitations") highlighted the political challenges to trilateral cooperation. Sukjoon Yoon (in *PacNet* #6A, "A trilateral intelligence sharing accord between Japan, Korea and the United States: implications and challenges") noted technical aspects such as command, control, communications, computers, and intelligence (C4I) systems and rules of engagement that need to be addressed. It is crucial to connect the dots and create a roadmap for a trilateral partnership mechanism.

The obvious starting point for any analysis is the political differences that undermine progress, particularly the state of Japan-ROK relations. The crux of this problem lies in the lack of consistent and respectful actions, as well as poor understanding of the other's circumstances and emotions, particularly concerning historical legacies. Problems are compounded by poor communication and misinformation on bilateral or regional issues. While the Japanese leadership's historical revisionism and the Seoul government's discomfort with Tokyo's policies are the central causes, problems are exacerbated by media and extremist hype that amplifies political disconnects.

The other major political problem is a lack of emphasis on promoting protection of shared assets. For Japan and the ROK, there are not just strategic, political-economic interests, but also interdependent dynamics of bilateral relations that have been pivotal to creating opportunities for interaction and growth, ranging from trade and travel to cultural and educational exchange. Given these characteristics, a security crisis in either state would impact the other; thus, both governments must promote an understanding that failure to work together to protect those assets is damaging to their own security.

The final missing link is a failure among the US, Japan, and the ROK to conceptualize a strategic and operational framework that creates incentives for cooperation and

reconciliation and institutionalizes an effective and sustainable mechanism. To achieve this, the three governments must address two basic questions: *cooperation for what and how?*

When defining the strategic purpose of cooperation, it is critical to recognize that US-Japan-ROK trilateral partnership will be conditional and limited. At this stage, a partnership to explicitly contain China or North Korea is not plausible. After all, while the US, Japan, and the ROK have concerns about China and North Korea, their interests and perceptions in dealing with the two states differ. Moreover, a threat-based trilateral front is susceptible to exploitation by Pyongyang and Beijing. Hence the threat-based approach would lack strategic strength and durability.

A better approach is to forge capability-based cooperation that uses existing assets and specialized skill-sets to fill vulnerabilities in the trilateral partnership. The US, Japan, and the ROK should start by focusing on areas such as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR), cyber, transport security, logistics, and if possible, missile defense. A capability-based partnership would allow the three governments to set specific agendas, operations, and processes, while lightening the burden as domestic realignments occur in the US, Japan, and the ROK.

Capabilities-based cooperation is vague in its strategic purpose and does not point to a particular threat. Yet, focused development of particular capabilities would work as a deterrent against threatening actions by state or nonstate actors. Moreover, by focusing on specific capabilities, the trilateral partnership will contribute to global security by working in regions beyond East Asia.

There are preconditions that enable trilateral cooperation.

First, a strategic vision for trilateral cooperation must be laid out. Tokyo must clearly support Seoul's interests in peninsula security issues, and the ROK should also understand Japanese concerns about regional stability. Strong US leadership is required not only to staple the partnership, but also to maintain Washington's security reassurance and presence in the region.

Second, implementing a strategic and operational framework for trilateral cooperation will involve realignments that require significant investments of political and bureaucratic capital. Given that governments are dealing with domestic political-economic issues that require nationalist rhetoric, facilitating realignments for trilateral cooperation will not be easy. Consistency and patience are needed to avoid holding progress hostage to politics but also to manage the many wheels that must turn to facilitate realignments.

Third, the three governments will need to agree on the strategic and legal caveats that trilateral cooperation will

involve. Japan's shift toward collective self-defense suggests that Tokyo will enhance operations in the so-called "gray zone" scenarios and be able to play a supportive role in peripheral areas of another state (with the express authorization of the counterpart). Likewise, the ROK's growing defense capabilities indicate that it, too, could play a more proactive role in the region. The three governments must define the specific plans and rules of engagement, so that they are able to sharpen their capabilities against particular contingencies.

Fourth, political sensitivities and transparencies of cooperation need to be better handled. While revealing certain parts of trilateral negotiations may be impractical, regular announcements about progress on guidelines for cooperation will contribute to enhanced mutual understanding between the people of Japan and the ROK. Furthermore, revealing sustained commitment by the two governments will help persuade publics of the need for trilateral cooperation.

As for operational mechanisms, the key enabler of a capabilities-based approach is solid coordination and integration of operations. Coordination in both politics and capabilities requires technical fluency, interoperability, and smooth communication channels. Achieving this would not only require bureaucratic realignments but also increased frequency and quality of joint exercises and training and the mutual dispatch of liaison officers. Furthermore, the US, Japan, and the ROK should form a caucus to coordinate the different chains of command.

A US-Japan-ROK trilateral partnership would develop greater capabilities that benefit regional security. Whether cooperation will work depends on leadership; not only in communication and dealing with political issues but also in forging the right partnership framework and establishing appropriate political and bureaucratic mechanisms. By no means should painful historical issues be swept under the rug. However, promotion of assets, careful structuring of the strategic and operational framework, together with future-oriented visions, would serve as the first steps toward an effective and lasting partnership.

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