

Testing Trilateralism

by Patrick M. Cronin

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It is axiomatic among diplomats that bilateral engagement is far easier than multilateral diplomacy, even among three nations. Yet for at least 20 years, the United States has consistently supported trilateral talks among officials from Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo. And for 20 years, countless policy coordination meetings, consultations, and simulations, have been useful but devoid of obvious security impact.

That may have changed Monday with an impressive show of alliance solidarity against North Korean aggression. Meeting in Washington, South Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Kim Sung-hwan, Japanese Foreign Minister Seiji Meahara, and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton “affirmed that the DPRK’s provocative and belligerent behavior threatens all three countries and will be met with solidarity from all three countries.” They also condemned North Korea’s newly revealed uranium enrichment facility. Given Pyongyang’s failure to “demonstrate a genuine commitment to complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization,” they further pledged to strengthen multilateral cooperation to curb proliferation of all weapons of mass destruction and missiles.

If Secretary Hillary Clinton’s hosting of her Korea and Japanese counterparts is any indicator, then trilateralism, or at least US use of it in East Asia, is finally showing some potential. Could this be smart power in action? Although the three stopped short of explicitly criticizing China’s refusal to fully pressure its ally in Pyongyang, Beijing must surely feel more isolated. Indeed, even Russia’s parallel denunciation of North Korean aggression was being praised in Washington.

To be sure, the Dec. 6 trilateral meeting was punctuated by more affirmations than actions, more pledge than plans. But the meeting was noteworthy if for no other reason than its spectacularly drawn out list of issues on which the three professed shared interests: not just North Korea, but also China, proliferation, maritime security, freedom of navigation, terrorism, piracy, disaster relief, disease, energy, climate change, green growth, Afghanistan, Middle East peace, the Mekong Delta, development assistance, democracy, human rights, open economic markets, free trade, and regional institutions.

A cynic might ask whether they disagreed on *anything*. And surely the three trans-Pacific travelling ministers, including newly arrived Ministers Meahara and Kim, lacked sufficient time to examine all of these issues in a few hours. But that may in part highlight the meeting’s significance.

Without needing to discuss every issue, the three were quickly able to endorse an extensive list of overlapping interests. Cooperation among the three was almost automatic and habitual.

It was not always that way. When former Secretary of Defense William Perry firmed up alignment among the three nations in dealing with North Korea a decade ago, he did so by meeting in each capital. This time the three were able to meet together at the same time. This is a landmark achievement of policy alignment among three major democratic states with a core interest in preserving a peaceful, open, rules-based system in Northeast Asia. In particular, Japan and South Korea have come a long way; much of this owes to far-sighted leadership in both capitals, but it also is no small measure a result of US diplomacy.

Various motives have been ascribed to the staunch embrace of ‘mini-lateralism’ by the US: among them, the notion that the United States, Japan and South Korea form a natural democratic caucus to influence wider multilateral talks such as the Six-Party Talks that also include China, Russia and North Korea, while also providing a longer-term hedge against a reemerging China. By whatever metric one measures, the result is that the three are more able to talk and work together than at any time in their history.

The three ministers indeed reinforced strong and improving bilateral relationships among the trio. At the same time, it is also true that they have raised expectations which, if tested, must be met. Trilateralism has never before been so much in the spotlight, and who knows what crisis lurks around the corner when dealing with the behavior of the regime in North Korea.

Despite the joint proclamation in support of peace and prosperity, it remains premature to declare the triumph of trilateralism. One might recall the admonition of Charles de Gaulle, who once said, “Diplomats are useful only in fair weather. As soon as it rains they drown in every drop.” Let us hope that this latest instance of diplomacy will prove the exception to that maxim.

The diplomatic flourishes witnessed in Washington this week are backed by a track record of diplomacy by the three nations. But there is no track record for what tomorrow will bring. The ministers better be sure their entire governments are braced and ready if and when crisis responses, and not just diplomatic statements, are required. Surely that would be trilateral diplomacy’s gravest test. It cannot afford to be found wanting. Thanks to the effort of these three ministers, there is an improved chance that mini-lateralism can prove its mettle.