



Time for Trilateralism?

By Christopher Griffin and Michael Auslin

A perennial challenge for American strategy in Asia has been the asymmetries between Washington's two most important alliances in the region. Although South Korea and Japan were steady partners throughout the Cold War, historic antagonisms between the two countries have hindered the coordination of alliance policy and capabilities. As the threats and challenges we face in Asia evolve, the United States should work with South Korea and Japan's new leaders to launch a trilateral security initiative.

For over six decades, the United States has provided stability in Asia through its sustained military presence and “hub-and-spoke” system of bilateral alliances. But the strategic environment in Asia is undergoing dramatic change with such emerging and ongoing challenges as the North Korean nuclear situation, China’s rapidly growing military, and natural disasters like the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. These challenges require the United States either to seek new ways to coordinate its Asian alliances or to risk seeing its influence in the region steadily eroded.

The need for coordination is most evident in Washington’s relations with Japan and South Korea, officially known as the Republic of Korea (ROK), vital allies perched at the front line of Asia’s security challenges. But these countries remain mired in a mutual animosity that has complex roots, a situation that has frustrated trilateral security cooperation with the United States. Fortunately, the near-simultaneous inaugurations of new leaders in Seoul and Tokyo present a unique opportunity to move beyond these longstanding obstacles and engage our two most important Asian allies in a trilateral agenda.

In South Korea, the February 25 inauguration of President Lee Myung-bak presents a break from

the confrontational identity politics of his predecessor, Roh Moo-hyun. Lee has declared his intention to seek a “mature relationship” with Japan in which he will dispense with symbolic feuds in favor of enhanced cooperation.¹ Meanwhile, the late 2007 accession of Japanese prime minister Yasuo Fukuda provides Lee with an eager partner in Tokyo. On the same day that Lee called for a mature relationship, Fukuda declared in his annual policy speech to Japan’s Diet that he would seek a “future-oriented and stable relationship” with South Korea.²

At face value, these statements reflect a mutual desire to restore some basic comity to ROK-Japanese relations. Indeed, “mature” and “future-oriented” refer to a decade-old summit in which the two countries agreed to place cooperation above historical feuds.³ But private comments by policymakers in Seoul and Tokyo imply that Lee and Fukuda are looking beyond restoring the status quo ante on the “history issue.”⁴ As one heavyweight in Japan’s ruling Liberal Democratic Party puts it, “I’ve spoken with President Lee’s advisers, and we agreed that the time has come to push for greater cooperation bilaterally and also with the United States.”⁵

The United States must play a vital role if South Korea and Japan are to capitalize on this opportunity to transcend long-standing barriers to greater cooperation. Even if both of these new

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leaders are eager to push the envelope, domestic politics will limit their freedom to maneuver unless the United States participates in the process. For Washington, the timing could not be better.

From Complementary to Coordinated

In recent years, Washington’s alliances with Seoul and Tokyo have each undergone significant change, creating gaps between goals and capabilities as we move our forces throughout Asia and as our security partners invest in their militaries. Although this process of transforming the alliances is an American priority, it has also revealed, yet again, how little South Korea and Japan trust one another and how difficult it is to maintain a united front without trilateral coordination.

Since 2003, the United States has been engaged in three major sets of force posture and capabilities reviews that affect Northeast Asia: the Global Posture Review (GPR), an effort to restructure the global deployment of American forces to better match the post-Cold War world; the Strategic Policy Initiative (SPI), a bilateral review with South Korea of the future of the alliance centered on the transfer of capabilities and command authority to Seoul, as well as the reduction and realignment of U.S. troops on the peninsula; and the Defense Policy Review Initiative (DPRI), a bilateral dialogue with Japan to develop a set of roles, missions, and capabilities between the two partners, as well as a realignment of U.S. forces there.⁶

Although carried out separately, these simultaneous reviews have served common, reciprocal goals: the United States aims to enhance burden sharing within each alliance, while both South Korea and Japan seek to reduce the impacts of American garrisons on their respective populations. For example, the United States agreed in a set of bilateral deals with Seoul and Tokyo in late 2005 to remove some twelve thousand soldiers from Korea and some eight thousand Marines from Japan over the next decade.⁷ While the GPR has provided an overarching framework for American goals in these efforts, the absence of sustained, senior trilateral dialogue has prevented effective coordination.

This lack of coordination creates significant uncertainty for both South Korea and Japan about Asia’s

future strategic landscape. The assumption of greater “burden-sharing” in either Seoul or Tokyo ultimately involves attaining new capabilities: Seoul is undertaking a fundamental modernization of its military by 2020, while Japanese politicians have worked since 2001 to dismantle the array of restrictions on Japanese defense policy, including the possible revision of Japan’s war-renouncing constitution.⁸ Although American policymakers welcome these growing capabilities in South Korea and Japan, their counterparts in Seoul and Tokyo are observing each other’s military development warily.⁹

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While our two allies upgrade their capabilities, the United States has begun reducing its military presence in each country. Although this is popular in Korea and Japan, it also diminishes the ability of the alliances to balance American power directly against regional threats and reassure allied policymakers that U.S. troops are a tripwire for American commitment. The Pentagon is transferring new weapons systems to Guam in an effort to maintain the regional balance, but it is still engaged in a balancing act in which American credibility is on the line. If South Korea or

Japan loses faith in American alliance commitments, it is difficult to predict how either would respond.

The net result is that while the United States has achieved its immediate goals in the GPR-SPI-DPRI process, ongoing antagonism between Seoul and Tokyo threatens the long-term health of both alliances. A specter of this danger was seen after North Korea’s July 2006 missile test, when Roh’s government focused its criticism not on Pyongyang but on Tokyo’s “making a fuss” over the launches.¹⁰ Senior South Korean officials under Roh even identified Japan as their principal security concern.¹¹ Over time, this kind of hostility could render both alliances ineffective as our partners turn against one another.¹²

Toward a Trilateral Security Committee

After years of deteriorated ROK-Japanese relations, rapprochement under Lee and Fukuda will allow the United States to develop a common security agenda with its two most important allies in Asia. The first step toward coordinating the U.S.-ROK and U.S.-Japanese alliances will be the establishment of a sustained senior dialogue

on security affairs. Such a dialogue would provide the guidance and imprimatur necessary for working-level officials to develop a broad agenda. Moreover, a relatively formal mechanism—centered perhaps on annual meetings—would be more self-sustaining than ad hoc negotiations on immediate issues.

Such a mechanism should be based upon the regular senior dialogue that already occurs between the United States and its Northeast Asian allies. The U.S.-ROK Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) is an annual arrangement between the U.S. secretary of defense, the ROK minister of national defense, and the chairmen of each nation’s joint military staffs. Meanwhile, U.S.-Japanese security consultations are centered at the Security Consultative Committee (SCC), which is composed of the American secretaries of state and defense and their Japanese counterparts.

A prospective “Trilateral Security Committee” could link these two ongoing dialogues. Such a mechanism would allow the three countries’ defense ministers to offer strategic direction and establish institutional priorities for their respective departments and ministries.

This proposed body would also distinguish itself from the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG), an effort at trilateral cooperation on North Korea from 1999 to 2003. A major reason the TCOG dissolved was American disinterest in a body that required constant senior-level effort while providing diminishing returns.¹³ The coordinating mechanism proposed here would avoid this pitfall by simultaneously upgrading and downgrading the level of dialogue: senior-level talks would occur less frequently than under TCOG, allowing good ideas and successful efforts to float up from the institutionalized working-level negotiations over time.

Indeed, perhaps the most important function of a Trilateral Security Committee would be to affirm and guide working-level negotiations among the three countries. Some of these talks are already occurring. For example, the U.S. Pacific Command’s Policy and Planning Directorate coordinates talks with the military staffs in Tokyo and Seoul, and the three governments are investing in enhanced communications capabilities, such as video teleconferencing. The key challenge now is to imbue these efforts with purpose and structure. For

a Trilateral Security Committee to carry out such a task, it must develop a common strategic vision among the three countries and coordinate the roles, missions, and capabilities that will carry the alliances into the future.

A Common Strategic Vision

In a series of recent bilateral agreements through the SCM and the SCC, South Korea and Japan have each articulated strategic objectives shared with the United States and put in place operational plans for effecting them.¹⁴ These sets of agreements, however, neither refer

to one another nor provide guidance as to how the alliances are to work together to promote security in Northeast Asia. Addressing these lacunas must be the first goal for trilateral security cooperation.

A Trilateral Security Committee could contribute to this goal by directing the policy shops in each country’s defense and foreign ministries to craft common language on several issues, especially the development of South Korean and Japanese military capabilities, the future of North Korea, and the potential for expanding cooperation to such global issues as sea lanes.

The first of these issues is at the heart of the matter: how South Korea and Japan can simultaneously develop military capabilities while enhancing mutual confidence in one another’s benevolent intentions. Trilateral policy discussions to hammer out common strategic objectives can be a key step in this process, hopefully reaching the point at which South Korea and Japan can explicitly welcome each other’s evolving capabilities and use that common understanding as a basis for further operational talks on coordination and collaborative development.

The second issue—the future of North Korea—illustrates a useful distinction between the Trilateral Security Committee and the defunct TCOG. Whereas the success or failure of TCOG was contingent upon coordinated policy toward the North Korean nuclear crisis that developed after November 2002, the proposed Trilateral Security Committee would treat the North Korean dilemma as just one of many concerns, meaning that the first instance of disagreement over Pyongyang would not doom trilateral cooperation.

On the third issue—expanding cooperation to global issues—both South Korea and Japan have shown

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significant ambivalence in recent years. The United States has looked to each to provide the necessary strategic flexibility for forward-based U.S. forces to deploy on missions outside East Asia and has also raised expectations for its allies to directly contribute to Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom.¹⁵

There is no firm consensus in either Seoul or Tokyo with regards to the role their countries will play in future global operations, although this issue will partly determine how they justify their growing military capabilities and future relations with the United States.

Developing a common strategic vision on these issues is the first step to developing a trilateral security relationship. The broad range of shared interests among the United States, South Korea, and Japan puts such a vision in reach. It will also be necessary for the three governments to assess how their bilateral alliances may be better coordinated—and in some cases integrated—at the operational level in order to achieve these objectives.

Coordinating Roles, Capabilities, and Missions

For too long, America's alliances in Asia have amounted to less than the sum of their parts, as each has functioned bilaterally without sharing capabilities or commitments. The changing American force posture in Asia requires dismantling such barriers. As the United States shifts its military from South Korea and Japan to forward bases like the one on Guam, it will be essential for the three countries to discuss how those capabilities will be called upon in the event of a crisis in the region.¹⁶ Three sets of operational capabilities in particular merit prioritization: cooperation for humanitarian disasters, cooperative maritime security, and missile defense.

Crisis Response and Humanitarian Assistance. The response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami provided the United States, South Korea, and Japan with valuable lessons about how the three countries can coordinate their efforts. Both South Korea and Japan sent personnel to the U.S.-led Combined Support Force 536 headquarters, and, in addition to the air, sea, and land assets that each country dispatched to the rescue effort, elements of U.S. Forces Korea and U.S. Forces Japan were also

mobilized, requiring coordinated logistical flows from the two countries.¹⁷

Future trilateral dialogue on humanitarian disaster response can build on the tsunami experience to move toward a framework for joint operations to provide post-crisis humanitarian assistance. Indeed, in February 2008,

the three countries agreed to launch a trilateral steering group to develop military cooperation for such incidents.¹⁸

Given the risk of natural or man-made humanitarian disasters in Asia, developing this capability will remain a priority for U.S.-ROK-Japanese relations.

Maritime Security. South Korea depends upon the security of sea lanes running from the Persian Gulf for some 80 percent of its energy; 90 percent of Japan's energy resources flow through the same channels.¹⁹ While Japan gradually assumed responsibility for policing the sea lanes between Japan and the Strait of Malacca from the 1970s until the November 2001 dispatch of Japanese

Maritime Self-Defense Force vessels to the Indian Ocean in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, there has been disappointingly little cooperation between South Korea and Japan in this regard.²⁰

The absence of a tradition of trilateral maritime security cooperation is especially problematic for American policy goals because of the ongoing procurement by South Korea and Japan of ever more advanced maritime platforms, including the South Korean *Sejong the Great* and the Japanese *Kongo* class ships, their respective Aegis-equipped air warfare destroyers. Without a clear, commonly articulated role for these vessels to play in each alliance relative to the other, it often appears that South Korea and Japan are arming to deter one another. Greater maritime security cooperation will reassure Seoul and Tokyo that their new capabilities are part of coordinated alliance capabilities, not signs of a bilateral arms race.

An important subset of maritime security cooperation is the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), the ongoing international effort to share information about and interdict weapons of mass destruction. South Korea has chosen not to join this effort and made a pointed declaration of its intentions not to following the October 2006 North Korean nuclear test.²¹ Seoul's participation in the PSI would not only cultivate trust between Seoul, Tokyo, and

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Washington, but it would also increase the chances of stopping North Korean proliferation.

Missile Defense. The most direct route to coordination between the two alliances' missile defense efforts is integration. This is critical because both allies face a dire threat: North Korea's arsenal of Scud, Nodong, and Taepodong ballistic missiles can deliver conventional, chemical, or biological warheads to targets throughout Asia, placing at least tens of thousands of lives at risk. Collaboration on missile defense could allow the three countries to deter a North Korean attack credibly.

Since late 2004, the United States and Japan have developed a joint missile defense system that will include a combination of mid-course intercepting SM-3 missiles based on U.S. and Japanese Aegis-equipped ships and terminal-phase PAC-3 missile batteries.²² In support of this effort, the United States has deployed X-band radar systems to Japan while the two sides have developed enhanced information-sharing and joint command-and-control capabilities. In December 2007, a Japanese destroyer successfully intercepted a ballistic missile with an SM-3 missile, heralding Japan's arrival on the missile defense stage.²³

South Korea has watched these developments from the sidelines, avoiding participation in the U.S. missile defense system, postponing the purchase of PAC-3 missiles until 2012, and declining to invest in SM-3 missiles for their own Aegis-class destroyers.²⁴ This hesitancy to develop a missile defense system reflects both the unwillingness of the Roh government to risk offending Pyongyang and legitimate South Korean concerns about the effectiveness of intercepting missiles that are traveling relatively short distances down the peninsula.

It is in the context of South Korea's misgivings that the United States and Japan stand to benefit most from engaging Seoul on missile defense cooperation. Defeating any North Korean missile barrage in the future would protect vital American military capabilities based in Japan or Guam, minimize the risk that an intentional North Korean provocation could lead to all-out war, and help prevent Japan from taking independent action in response. Honest discussion about the stakes in this matter should open the door for improved trilateral relations.

The agenda for coordinating roles, missions, and capabilities between the U.S.-ROK and U.S.-Japanese alliances remains very broad,²⁵ but progress in these three areas will be a good start.

Seizing the Opportunity

In many ways, the Trilateral Security Committee proposal would represent a fundamental realignment of American security policy in Asia away from the traditional hub-and-spoke system of exclusive bilateral alliances to a nascent multilateral system in which our security relationships are more closely entwined. As such, we offer several caveats about building such a coordinating mechanism.

First, South Korea and Japan still share a deep history of mistrust that could derail any sustained trilateral effort. The proposed arrangement would serve as a confidence-building mechanism so that the two countries can articulate shared objectives for developing national defense policies and capabilities. Moreover, such a mechanism would raise the stakes that both Seoul and Tokyo hold in improved bilateral relations. Although the deterioration of ROK-Japanese relations in the first years of this decade were dramatic, they reminded us that when the two sides shared a minimal security relationship, there was little to lose from playing games with historical issues or fanning nationalistic sentiments. Each side will face incentives to be more responsible with respect to these symbolic issues.

A second caveat is that China would almost certainly criticize a trilateral mechanism as an attempt at containment. China's recalcitrance is a longstanding obstacle to institution-building in Asia and something of a red herring. This proposal is for an effort by a triad of allies to address common security issues like the North Korean nuclear crisis, maritime security, and humanitarian response. Indeed, to the degree that Beijing supports long-term stability in Northeast Asia, it should welcome any arrangement that would minimize the chances of a destabilizing ROK-Japanese confrontation.

The onus remains upon Washington to engage the new governments in Seoul and Tokyo. Although both governments seek to develop trilateral relations, neither will be willing to engage the other without American leadership. The present alignment of leadership in Seoul and Tokyo offers Washington a rare opportunity to build a more robust pillar for Asian security—an opportunity that we should not let slip by.

Notes

1. "No More Demands for Apologies from Japan: Lee," *Chosun Ilbo* (Seoul), January 18, 2008.

2. Yasuo Fukuda, "Policy Speech by Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda to the 169th Session of the Diet" (Tokyo, January 18, 2008), available at www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/hukudaspeech/2008/01/18housin_e.html (accessed February 29, 2008).

3. Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Japan–Republic of Korea Joint Declaration: A New Japan–Republic of Korea Partnership towards the Twenty-first Century," Tokyo, October 8, 1998, available at www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/korea/joint9810.html (accessed February 29, 2008).

4. Interviews conducted by the authors in Seoul, November 4–6, 2007, and Tokyo, January 21–25, 2008.

5. Interview conducted by the authors in Tokyo, January 22, 2008.

6. Robert D. Critchlow, *U.S. Military Overseas Basing: New Developments and Oversight Issues for Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2005), 11–12; and Yuki Tatsumi, "The Defense Policy Review Initiative: A Reflection," *PacNet*, April 27, 2006, available through www.csis.org/component/option,com_csis_pubs/task/view/id,3231/ (accessed February 29, 2008).

7. Emma Chanlett-Avery, *The Changing U.S.-Japan Alliance: Implications for U.S. Interests* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2008), 1, 7, 17.

8. For background on South Korea and Japan's efforts—and their limitations—see Taik-young Hamm, "The Self-Reliant National Defense of South Korea and the Future of the U.S.-ROK Alliance," *Policy Forum Online*, June 20, 2006, available at www.nautilus.org/fora/security/0649Hamm.html (accessed February 29, 2008); and Christopher W. Hughes, *Japan's Re-Emergence as a "Normal" Military Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

9. Leif-Eric Easley, "Securing Japan's Positive Role in North-South Reconciliation: The Need for a Strong U.S.-ROK Alliance to Reassure Japan," *Academic Paper Series on Korea* 1 (2008): 171–74.

10. When Junichiro Koizumi described South Korea's criticism as "unfortunate," Blue House spokesman Jung Tae-ho retaliated by scolding Japanese leaders' "arrogant and thoughtless remarks to try to stoke a crisis on the peninsula and take advantage of the situation to build up their military." (David Kang and Ji-Young Lee, "Missiles May Mark a Turning Point," *Comparative Connections* 8, no. 3 [October 2006]: 142.)

11. Also in July 2007, unification minister Lee Jeong-suk stated that "when it comes to security threats, North Korea poses a microscopic one in the short term, but we can't deny that Japan poses one in the long term and from a historical point of view." (*Ibid.*, 142.)

12. This is a possibility that our adversaries appear both to understand and to seek, as indicated by a sample of news

releases by Pyongyang's Korean Central News Agency while ROK-Japanese tensions peaked in 2006: "Japan's Moves to Revive Militarism under Fire," October 29, 2006; "Rally for Solidarity for Settlement of 'Comfort Women' Held in South Korea," August 14, 2006; and "Japan's Moves to Grab Tok Islet Assailed in South Korea," April 26, 2006. All articles are available on the North Korean News Database at www.nk-news.net/index.php.

13. At the beginning of its life, the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) occupied half the working hours of its American representative, State Department counselor Wendy Sherman, and held fourteen meetings over thirteen months. In short, it simply required too much attention from too high a level of government. See James Schoff, "The Evolution of TCOG as a Diplomatic Tool" (first interim report, Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, Cambridge, Mass., November 2004), 8–10.

14. See, for example, Republic of Korea and United States, "The 38th Security Consultative Meeting Joint Communiqué," Washington, D.C., October 20, 2006, available at www.defenselink.mil/news/Oct2006/d20061020uskorea.pdf (accessed February 29, 2008); and Japan and United States, "Security Consultative Committee Document: U.S.-Japan Alliance: Transformation and Realignment for the Future," Washington, D.C., October 29, 2005, available at www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/security/scc/doc0510.html (accessed February 29, 2008).

15. For example, in March 2005, President Roh declared that U.S. forces in Korea would not be allowed to deploy to contingencies without his approval. Likewise, Japan's extended debate over and temporary cancellation of the deployment of its Maritime Self-Defense Force to the Indian Ocean indicates ongoing reservations in Tokyo about committing to a robust global agenda.

16. James L. Schoff has already contributed a significant study of this question in *Tools for Trilateralism: Improving U.S.-Japan-Korea Cooperation to Manage Complex Contingencies* (Dulles, Va.: Potomac Books, 2005).

17. James L. Schoff, "Security Policy Reforms in East Asia and a Trilateral Crisis Response Planning Opportunity" (second interim report, Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, Cambridge, Mass., March 2005), 17–20, available at www.ifpa.org/projects/TCOG2.htm (accessed February 29, 2008).

18. Kim Min-seok, "Militaries of Japan, U.S. and Korea to Cooperate," *JoongAng Ilbo* (Seoul), February 20, 2008.

19. Sugio Takahashi, "Toward Japan-ROK Security Cooperation Beyond Northeast Asia," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 14, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 13.

20. The process by which Japan increased its maritime activities is described in Peter J. Wooley, *Japan's Navy: Politics and Paradox, 1971–2000* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2000).

See also Government of Japan, *The Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law*, October 2001, available at www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/policy/2001/anti-terrorism/1029terohougaiyou_e.html (accessed February 29, 2008).

21. "U.S. Seeks to Stop North Korean Weapons Traffic by Sea, Seoul Holds Out," *USA Today*, October 19, 2006.

22. For a short review of this effort, see Christopher Griffin, "A Blossoming Relationship," *Armed Forces Journal* (February 2007), available at www.aei.org/publication25562/.

23. "Japan Test Fires Its First Raytheon-Built Standard Missile Three," *Space Daily*, December 20, 2007.

24. Bruce E. Bechtol Jr., "Forging a Common Approach on Strength: Challenges and Opportunities for the Lee Myung-bak Presidency and the ROK-U.S. Alliance," in *Understanding New Political Realities in Seoul: Working toward a Common Approach to Strengthen U.S.-Korean Relations*, ed. L. Gordon Flake and Park Ro-byug (Washington, D.C.: Mansfield Foundation, 2008), available through www.mansfieldfdn.org/pubs/rokbook.htm (accessed February 29, 2008).

25. The October 2005 statement of the U.S.-Japanese Security Consultative Committee, for example, listed fifteen separate roles and missions for enhanced cooperation.