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US-Japan-Korea: Can They Reverse the Backsliding?

By Bo Ram Kwon

SYNOPSIS

Trilateral cooperation among the US, South Korea (ROK) and Japan have stalled as the Trump administration's diplomatic efforts fell short and the two key US allies were unable to overcome their differences. The three partners need a practical agenda supported by versatile diplomatic engagement.

COMMENTARY

TRILATERAL TIES among Japan, South Korea (ROK) and the United States have been afflicted by a serious lack of cooperation in recent years. The strategic environment under which the US cornered its alliances to share defence costs, where regional threat perceptions diverged and trust between the ROK and Japan eroded, failed to nurture an appetite to work together.

Historically, enthusiasm for trilateral cooperation has been strongest on the US side to create a prosperous and secure environment in Northeast Asia. It should be concerning that policy expert groups in Tokyo and Seoul have discussed the possibility of maintaining a business-like bilateral relationship, at best.

Harvesting Low-Hanging Fruits

A recent publication, "Reinvesting in US-Japan-Republic of Korea Strategic Relations: A Practical Trilateral Agenda," just released in February 2021 by the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP), offers policy recommendations for trilateral cooperation. The NCAFP is a New York-based non-profit organisation dedicated to the resolution of conflicts that threaten US national interests.

It takes into consideration the respective domestic constraints and regional interests,

as well as the need to build a sustainable vision for the alliance. The overall tone of the document is deliberate and solemn, suggesting that the parties should:

- Keep expectations low and focus on harvesting low hanging fruits;
- Restore and maintain diplomatic engagement on multiple levels and incorporate a mixture of high- and low-profile efforts for sustainable cooperation results;
- Pursue cooperation on regional and global issues in the short to medium term.

Trilateral Diplomacy: Bringing It Back on Track

First and foremost, it is critical that the Biden administration immediately repairs bilateral relations with both Seoul and Tokyo since absent these strong ties, any effort to pursue trilateralism will fall short. Low-profile diplomacy should be given priority to restore lines of communication and rebuild trust.

Virtual engagement mechanisms that have expanded during the regrettable coronavirus pandemic should be fully utilised to infuse a whole-of-government approach to trilateral cooperation, especially on issues related to global public health and climate change. Medium term recommendations include launching a trilateral 2+2+2 dialogue where diplomatic and defence officials can collaborate and balance out their differences.

Meanwhile, it is important to tone the muscles of cooperation by addressing future issues that range from demographic challenges to Arctic and space research, while formulating an alliance vision based on a shared range of regional threat perceptions.

On North Korea, discussions should include how to maintain leverage; the conditions under which certain sanctions can be eased; and how to sequence incentives. A multilateral strategy needs to be articulated to protect from China's economic coercion as experienced by Australia and the ROK, among others.

Equally important is to formulate a conflict-resolving mechanism to dissuade middle powers such as Japan and the ROK from weaponising economic interdependence for short term gains with far reaching negative consequences.

Considering the recent seizure of a South Korean vessel by Iran in the Persian Gulf, trilateral diplomatic coordination is also needed to call out coercive behaviour that targets policies in compliance with US-led economic sanctions and tests the boundaries of international maritime law.

"Do No Harm" Approach Needed

The US, ROK and Japan should adopt a "Do No Harm" approach to the existing security cooperation apparatus while aiming for a sustainable partnership embedded in a global network based on mutual respect and understanding. Existing platforms such as the Defence Trilateral Talks (DTT) need to be revamped to facilitate seamless security cooperation during the pandemic.

Due to hardening national sentiment between Seoul and Tokyo, functional cooperation either needs to be acceptable to domestic audiences based on common threat

perceptions or be conducted beyond sensitive areas. The growing nuclear and missile threat of North Korea calls for a thorough review of existing bilateral military arrangements and operation planning to better reflect trilateral responsibilities.

The realignment of US forces in the ROK and Japan are interrelated, as well as the issue of wartime Operational Control Authority (OPCON) transfer, which calls for deliberation and mutual consultation.

Public awareness campaigns and tabletop exercises including strategists and experts are needed to enhance mutual understanding of these issues as well as recognition of the need for sustained intelligence cooperation through the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA).

In addition, closer military-to-military coordination against Sino-Russian strategic cooperation in Northeast Asia is warranted as they will attempt to drive a wedge in trilateral relations. The ROK Navy and Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Force (MSDF) could even expand joint exercises in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean on anti-Piracy campaigns, reaffirming the larger Indo-Pacific region.

Reversing the Backsliding

The three states can cooperate in dealing with and recovering from the coronavirus pandemic. Efforts to share best practices and protective equipment, facilitating safe and secure vaccination for nationals and foreigners within their respective territories are underway but only the beginning. Commitment to facilitate fast and fair distribution of vaccines and actual vaccination to areas that need assistance is just as critical.

Meanwhile, sequencing the entry of the ROK and the US into the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) is key to sustain the momentum for regional economic integration, raise standards and appraise a rules-based order.

Improvements can be made in sharing best practices to enhance information and communications technologies (ICTs) and support capacity building in Southeast Asia, where the US Indo-Pacific Strategy, the ROK's New Southern Policy and Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) Strategy align.

Although there has been some backsliding in trilateral relations, the stability of Northeast Asia would strongly depend on the three countries reversing this trajectory and beginning to strive for closer trilateral cooperation.

Bo Ram Kwon is Associate Research Fellow at the Center for Security and Strategy at the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses (KIDA) and a contributor to the NCAFP report. She is a Visiting Associate at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.
