What’s Needed to Bring the US, Japan and South Korea Closer Together

Tokyo and Seoul are indisputably Washington’s two most important allies in Asia. They are not only central to America’s security architecture for the region, they are also important economic partners and share common values such as democracy and a commitment to the rule of law. And yet the prospect of a deep and effective trilateral relationship among the three countries has proved elusive. Is there a path forward?

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A South Korean Perspective
Seoul’s ‘Pragmatic’ Road to Trilateral Co-operation

By Jong-Yun Bae & Ki-Jung Kim

South Korea’s sometimes unique views on national and regional security issues are rooted in historical experience, the reality of being surrounded by major powers and the continuing fallout from the Korean War. As a result, Seoul does not automatically accept the idea of a deeper trilateral alliance with Japan and the US. Dig deeper, write Jong-Yun Bae and Ki-Jung Kim, and South Korea’s approach is consistently pragmatic.

SINCE the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948, the country’s core interests have focused on national security and even survival. This was fundamentally derived from the division of the peninsula, the Korean War and never-ending confrontation with North Korea. As a result, Koreans have believed the US-RoK alliance is vital to their security.

But another dimension of South Korean security concerns is more deeply rooted in history and perceptions of the geopolitical environment. As a relatively small power, Korea is sandwiched between much bigger powers. Since the beginning of modern Northeast Asia, Korea’s fate has been determined by big-power games, particularly involving China, the continental power, and Japan, the maritime power that eventually colonized the Korean Peninsula in 1910. In addition to the challenges on the peninsula, surviving conflicts among the surrounding big powers without antagonizing them has also been a central South Korean security concern.

As a result, South Korea’s perception of security threats is not necessarily identical to those of other big powers, including its American ally. Even after the end of the Cold War in the rest of the world, South Korea has responded somewhat differently to a rising China, North Korea’s nuclear and missile development programs and trilateral security co-operation with Japan and the US.

Conservative, Progressive or Pragmatic?
South Korea’s view of China combines a perception of both opportunity and constraint. With the different perceptions of China, diverse political views emerge. Conservatives, who have been accustomed to depend totally on the US for security, distrust both North Korea and China, and accept the US and Japan’s views of China as a “threat.” They believe that irrational North Korea will not change and that China already threatens South Korea due to its Air Defense Identification Zone in the East China Sea and its ongoing build-up of naval power. They emphasize solutions that call for strengthening the US-RoK alliance against North Korea, and for the new and, as they see it, inevitable US-Japan-South Korea trilateral security co-operation arrangement against China.

Conservatives thus support the deployment of the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system in South Korea and the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan, as parts of their solution.

Progressives, however, want to break down the Cold War structure on the peninsula and in Northeast Asia, and they assume that North Korea and China can become feasible co-operative partners. They think that dialogue and compromise could turn North Korea into a partner, though not fully reliable, for peace, and that strategic co-operation with China on North Korean issues could make peace on the peninsula possible. This would allow for the reduction of security tensions and eventually help achieve regional peace and co-prosperity in ways that are not always compatible with the “strategic distrust” policy of the US and Japan. This camp is concerned that exclusive trilateral co-operation against China, which is not solely a threat, and the deployment of THAAD in South Korea could worsen tensions on the peninsula.

The reasoning is that trilateral security co-operation as envisioned might accelerate big power games in Northeast Asia, leading to bloc confrontation without even solving North Korean issues.

A third group, diplomatic pragmatists, put South Korea’s strategic interests first, make discreet responses on trilateral security co-operation and separate North Korea from the China-threat issue. They assert that South Korea should participate in or even organize trilateral or quadrilateral security co-operation on North Korean issues, but respond prudently to trilateral co-operation against China. They expect that South Korea can share in the benefits of a rising China in terms of both economic gains and enhanced security including on North Korea. In this pragmatic view, there is little reason to multiply confrontations with neighboring countries other than North Korea.

Despite severe political conflicts between the conservative and progressive views, the South Korean government’s actual responses to issues do not always clearly correspond to the insistence of one group or another. Because of the trade-offs inherent in South Korea’s complex security situation, its foreign policy needs to respond effectively to differing influences from neighboring countries: big power games and rogue state threats.

Seoul needs the general support and co-operation of its neighbors to solve the North Korean impasse. At the same time, South Korea does not want to be entangled in power games among its big neighbors. So, while it has weak domestic political support, South Korean foreign policy must be aware of the strategic usefulness of pragmatism in terms of actual policy.

No Consensus on Trilateral Co-operation
Before the recent issue over the deployment of THAAD, Seoul’s foreign policy with regard to threats from both North Korea and China was viewed as reluctant and even lacking consistency. Critics from Japan have been the harshest. South Korea has known that Washington and Tokyo strongly desire deep trilateral security co-operation and eventually a trilateral alliance in the region. But maintaining the bilateral alliance with the US, which has a clear enemy in North Korea, and new attempts to establish a trilateral alliance that also targets China, are entirely a different matter for South Korea.

Though the US and Japan commonly agree that there is a security threat from both China and North Korea, South Korea has to make a clear distinction between the threat from North Korea and the strategic opportunity represented by a rising China.

The conservative view is that from a viewpoint solely of military security, the US-Japan-South Korea trilateral military alliance is unavoidable given security challenges from both China and North...
Korea. Yet there is no social consensus on this view. First, because of the dual nature of South Korea’s security sensitivity, joining a trilateral alliance could restrict policy choices and shifts on North Korean issues. Such a tight Cold War-like confrontational regional structure would not allow sufficient room for South Korea to adjust. Moreover, Seoul is worried that a more confrontational regional structure would place South Korea on the front lines again as a possible victim caught between continental and maritime powers. Confrontation could thus mean sacrificing peace on the peninsula and a worsening situation on North Korean issues.

Second, the military alliance with Japan is not acceptable to South Korean society because of deep-rooted anti-Japanese sentiment. Such an arrangement would be a reminder of the historical experience of the 19th century, when Japan used the word “alliance” as it began intruding into Korea’s internal affairs. “Co-operation” with Japan may be acceptable to many South Koreans, but “allying” with Japan is quite sensitive. The GSOMIA between Japan and South Korea concluded in November 2016 is a good example of this. Many South Koreans responded negatively to the agreement, expressing worries over Japanese military involvement in the peninsula and the development of a security alliance.

Third, there are dual and complicated perspectives on inter-Korean relations that affect the prospects for trilateral co-operation. These can be understood by noting the co-existence of “state-centric” and “nation-centric” perspectives on the peninsula. North Korea is, without question, a state in the eyes of other countries, including the US and Japan. But to South Korea, North Korea is both an enemy and the object of social sentiments that support humanitarian assistance for the North Korean people, reconciliation and co-operation. This deep-seated sentiment sees unification as an imperative. Thus, if South Korea could find a workable solution on North Korean issues and realize a successful path to unification, Seoul will not give up the strategic utility of China on the peninsula. North Korea and stopping Pyongyang’s missile program are not the sole or even the ultimate goal of South Korean foreign policy.

Even with trilateral co-operation on North Korean issues, South Korea’s attitude is changeable and cannot always be in harmony with others. Unlike the US, Japan and the wider international community, the denuclearization of North Korea and stopping Pyongyang’s missile program are not the sole or even the ultimate goal of South Korean foreign policy. Such policies could find a workable solution on North Korean issues, South Korea’s attitude is changeable and cannot always be in harmony with others. Unlike the US, Japan and the wider international community, the denuclearization of North Korea and stopping Pyongyang’s missile program are not the sole or even the ultimate goal of South Korean foreign policy. Those are part of a process of pragmatic policies aimed at peaceful co-existence and ultimately successful unification.

To realize its true foreign policy goals, South Korea may have to make more anguishing shifts in attitude or tactics. A paradoxical example of South Korea’s flexible pragmatic conservatism is related to the THAAD issue. After her February 2013 inauguration, President Park Geun-hye held several summit meetings with Chinese political leaders and also participated in Beijing’s nationalistic celebration of the 70th anniversary of the “Chinese victory over Japan” on Sept. 3, 2015. Park always emphasized the two countries’ strategic co-operation for the denuclearization of North Korea and peace on the peninsula. She saw China as a key player able to influence North Korea to stop its nuclear and missile programs. However, her strategic devotion to China could not prevent North Korea’s fourth nuclear test on Jan. 6, 2016, and fifth test on Sept. 9, 2016, and repeated ballistic missile launches. Thereafter, she suddenly approved the deployment of the US THAAD system in South Korea, despite China’s severe criticism. However, South Korea still does not see trilateral co-operation as the way to go. In short, Seoul will not give up the strategic utility of China on North Korean issues.

Pragmatism Comes First

Given these external and internal reasons, the South Korean government’s actual responses to diplomatic situations are a hybrid, such as pragmatic progressivism or pragmatic conservatism. In terms of US-Japan-South Korea trilateral co-operation, the experience of the Trilateral Co-operation and Oversight Group (TCOG) for North Korea’s nuclear program from April 1999 to January 2003 provides a good example of Seoul’s flexible pragmatic progressivism. The basic intention of TCOG was policy co-ordination to overcome their different perspectives and speak with one voice against North Korea. While the US and Japan wanted to harshly penalize North Korea for its provocation and irresponsibility, South Korea could not totally support that approach, which could raise security tensions and invite further North Korean provocation. Eventually, after North Korea’s official withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) on Jan. 11, 2003, South Korea shifted its attitude from punishment to dialogue, which resulted in the Six-Party Talks.

This means that even with trilateral co-operation on North Korean issues, South Korea’s attitude is changeable and cannot always be in harmony with others. Unlike the US, Japan and the wider international community, the denuclearization of North Korea and stopping Pyongyang’s missile program are not the sole or even the ultimate goal of South Korean foreign policy. Those are part of a process of pragmatic policies aimed at peaceful co-existence and ultimately successful unification. To realize its true foreign policy goals, South Korea may have to make more anguishing shifts in attitude or tactics.

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A New Government and Trilateral Co-operation

After South Korea’s National Assembly impeached President Park on Dec. 9, 2016, the government was upended. With a presidential election to be held on May 9, 2017, an argument on trilateral co-operation will re-emerge between conservatives and progressives contending for power. But the next South Korean government’s actual responses will likely not stray far from the diplomatic-pragmatic approach on North Korea and China. South Korea is likely to remain as a tacit partner in a US-Japan-South Korea trilateral security co-operation deal if it explicitly targets China. Whether conservative or progressive, the next government in Seoul needs strategic co-operation with China on North Korean issues. A conservative government that may emphasize harsher sanctions against North Korea will inevitably depend on China’s participation in sanctions to enhance strategic effectiveness. A progressive government may push for a multilateral gathering to carry on a dialogue about North Korean issues but will have to invite China to participate. Until now, the strategic usefulness of China lies in co-operation and friendship for reducing tension rather than in hostility.

Finally, as a reflection of South Korea’s diplomatic pragmatism, we can find other forms of trilateral co-operation in Northeast Asia, such as China-Japan-South Korea co-operation at diverse governmental levels, including summit meetings since 2008. Although the member countries do not have full mutual trust yet, the three countries agreed to organize the Trilateral Co-operation Secretariat (TCS) in Seoul and assign it the duty of promoting co-operative relations. South Korea has a positive view on close ties among all three Northeast Asian countries working to solve regional security issues, including North Korean issues. Seoul’s openness toward China-Japan-South Korea trilateral co-operation might help explain South Korea’s pragmatic views on US-Japan-South Korea trilateral co-operation that targets China.

Ki-Jung Kim is Professor at the Department of Political Science and International Studies and Dean of the Graduate School of Public Administration, Yonsei University, Seoul.

Jong-Yun Bae is Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science and International Studies at Yonsei University.