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 Japanese Perspective

The Korean Public and Limits of Trilateral Co-operation

By Yuichi Hosoya

While Japanese leaders have not been without fault in the ongoing struggle to forge a tighter security bond among the US, Japan and South Korea, it is primarily the inability of leaders in Seoul to convince their own public of the value of stronger security co-operation with Japan that has so far scuttled this vital project. Yuichi Hosoya takes a look at the view from Tokyo.

ON DEC. 6, 2010, Japanese Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara, South Korean Foreign Minister Sung-hwan Kim and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton met in Washington and agreed on a joint “Trilateral Statement,” in which “the Ministers pledged to maintain and enhance co-ordination and consultation on DPRK-related issues.” 1 North Korea had launched an artillery attack on Yeonpyeong Island on November 23, which deepened anxieties in South Korea. Therefore, despite widespread negative attitudes in South Korea toward security co-operation with Japan, Seoul agreed on the statement. At the time this was seen as a big step toward trilateral security co-operation between the US, Japan and South Korea.

In the light of this development, the government of the then ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) thought it was possible to further advance security co-operation with Seoul. The two governments eventually agreed on signing two important documents, the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) and the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) on Jan. 10, 2011. 2 South Korea’s government had already concluded GSOMIA with more than 20 other countries, including the US and Russia. Japan was not included in that group. In South Korea, Japan is often regarded as a possible security threat despite the fact that the two countries are both major US allies in East Asia. Japan’s government has sought to enhance security co-operation among the three democracies mainly in response to provocative actions by North Korea. Despite the clash of nationalisms between the Japanese and the South Koreans, both governments generally prioritize security co-operation over domestic politics when the North Korean threat is heightened.

The South Koreans, however, do not like to devote political resources to promoting such co-operation unless the military threat from North Korea is at a certain level of urgency. The biggest barrier has been a gap between the thinking of government officials and general public opinion on security co-operation with Japan. The issue often becomes politicized in South Korea.

TRILATERALISM’S RISE AND FALL, 2010-2012

There were several reasons why it was possible to convene the first trilateral foreign ministers meeting in 2010. First, the financial crisis of 2008 necessitated deeper economic co-operation between the governments of Japan and South Korea. Moreover, Seoul faced escalated military confrontation as a result of the sinking of the naval ship Cheonan in March 2010 and the North Korean artillery attack on Yeonpyeong Island. These factors reminded South Korean President Lee Myung-bak of the necessity of closer security co-operation with both the US and Japan.

At the same time, the DPJ government in Japan was in a position to forge better relations with Seoul. Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama visited Seoul on Oct. 9, 2009, before he visited Beijing to participate in the Trilateral Summit Meeting among China, Japan and South Korea. 3 It was generally believed that the DPJ government was more Asia-oriented. Hatoyama’s successor, Naoto Kan, also tried to promote Japan-South Korea co-operation.

While the North Korean military provocations provided an important incentive to sign the GSOMIA and ACSA, South Korea’s public opinion and mainstream media persisted in their negative attitude toward Japan. Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Maehara had been eager to promote security co-operation among the three countries, and he sent a strong signal to advance this policy in a speech in January 2011. 4 Maehara’s speech reflected a new strategic initiative based on Japan’s new National Defense Program Guidelines, which were adopted in December 2010. 5 In these guidelines, Japan’s security co-operation with partners such as South Korea, Australia and India were highlighted; Japan-South Korea co-operation was seen as an indispensable pillar of its new defense strategy.

Tokyo’s optimistic attitude soon disappeared when the South Korean government said that it intended to cancel the signing of the GSOMIA in Tokyo in June 2012. News media reported that this was because President Lee had not done enough prior consultation with the National Assembly and had not sufficiently explained the agreement to the South Korean people. 6 This exemplified the clear gap between official thinking within the Korean Ministry of Defense and the sentiments of the general public.

ENTER SHINZO ABE, 2012-2014

When Shinzo Abe became prime minister of Japan for the second time in December 2012, new difficulties in Japan-South Korea relations emerged. Abe was well known in South Korea for his right-wing ideology, and Korean media began to criticize his revisionist historical statements. On the other hand, Abe is one of only a few Japanese prime ministers since the end of the Cold War with a long-term strategic vision. Soon

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3 Sei-Young Cho, Nikkan gaikeishi: taishuu to kyouryoku no 50 nen (Tokyo: Hibiinosha, 2015) p.228. Cho was at the time Director-General of the Northeast Asian Affairs Bureau at South Korea’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. He was at the center of the creation of an enhanced South Korea-Japan partnership.

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after he returned as prime minister, he wrote an article entitled “Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond,” noting that “Australia, India, Japan and the US state of Hawaii form a diamond to safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the western Pacific.”

Importantly, Abe did not include South Korea in this diamond. But in a speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in February 2013, he said that “Japan must work even more closely with the US, [South] Korea, Australia and other like-minded democracies throughout the region.” In Abe’s strategic vision, it seemed that South Korea would play an important role in consolidating a rules-based international order in the Asia-Pacific region. But Abe could not be sufficiently confident in South Korea’s willingness to co-operate with Japan on security policy.

This strategic vision is seen in Japan’s first National Security Strategy document, issued in December 2013. It included Japan’s strategic vision on the future of the Asia-Pacific region and said that “Japan will strengthen co-operative relations with countries with which it shares universal values and strategic interest, such as the RoK, Australia, the countries of ASEAN, and India.” The document continued:

Close co-operation with South Korea is of great significance for peace and stability of the region, including in addressing North Korean nuclear and missile issues. For this reason, Japan will construct future-oriented and multi-layered relations and strengthen the foundation for security co-operation with South Korea. In particular, trilateral co-operation among Japan, the US and South Korea is a key framework in realizing peace and stability in East Asia.

At this time, however, the then South Korean President Park Geun-hye had not yet met Prime Minister Abe. Park thought that meeting with Abe would damage her own political popularity at home. In particular, the issue of comfort women was the most controversial item on the political agenda between the two countries. The US government appeared frustrated that historical issues obstructed the promotion of much-needed trilateral security co-operation.

REVIVING TRILATERAL CO-OPERATION, 2014-16

Although Park was not willing to meet her counterpart in Tokyo in 2013 and 2014, security co-operation among the three democracies remained important for at least three reasons. Abe’s strategic vision of security co-operation among like-minded countries necessitated stronger Japan-South Korea relations from a balance-of-power point of view. As China has become more powerful and assertive, Japan cannot be isolated and without partners. Second, the US government under President Barack Obama repeatedly pressured Park to create a better Tokyo-Seoul relationship. Third, Abe’s visit to the Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013 could not gain political support in the international community.

Obama attempted to bridge the divide with the Japan-US-RoK Trilateral Summit Meeting at the US Ambassador’s residence in The Hague on March 25, 2014. This was the first Trilateral Summit Meeting in six years, and the first face-to-face encounter between Abe and Park. At the meeting, both responded to Obama’s initiative positively. Abe said there were many areas where the three countries could deepen their co-operation, and expressed his intention to further expand co-operation. The three leaders concurred on the importance of closer co-ordination on North Korea and of the need for China to play an appropriate role to realize the denuclearization of North Korea. Undoubtedly, this summit brought fresh air into the situation.

At official and ministerial levels, the three governments have developed security co-operation in many important areas. At the end of May 2014, the top defense officials of Japan, the US and South Korea met during the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, as they had done the previous year, and reaffirmed the importance of security co-operation and sharing intelligence about North Korea’s nuclear weapons and missile threats.

Then, on July 2, the military chiefs of staff from the three countries held talks on the occasion of the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) and discussed the North Korean threat, among other matters related to security.

In 2015, two issues ignited heated debates in Japan on historical issues and security legislation. On Aug. 14, 2015, Abe issued a historical statement upholding the Murayama Statement—an apology for wartime aggression delivered by then Japanese Foreign Minister Tomichi Murayama in August 1995 on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. Abe’s statement was welcomed by many governments, because he did not contradict Japan’s previous historical statements.

Though criticisms of Abe’s statement could be seen in many South Korean newspapers, President Park responded positively. Because Abe did not revise Japan’s previous statements, including the Murayama Statement and the Kono Statement [of 1993] on comfort women, Park had more room to advance South Korean security co-operation with Japan.

In December 2015, Abe decided to reach an agreement on the comfort women issue, because this had been the biggest barrier to deeper political co-operation between the two countries. However, Park would face difficulties in implementing this agreement due largely to domestic political problems in South Korea. So far, the threat from North Korea has not been strong enough to advance security co-operation between Japan and South Korea, because South Korean public opinion is not yet ready to accept it.

CONCLUSION

Because Abe has much stronger political capital than Park, especially after Park’s impeachment, it has been easier for Abe to promote trilateral security co-operation. The US-Japan alliance also has much broader support in Japan than the US-RoK alliance enjoys in South Korea. Because the South Korean public is less willing to support trilateral security co-operation, it is important that the governments of both Japan and South Korea try to convince the Korean people of the necessity of such co-operation. Abe’s historical statement on comfort women has had some positive effects on attitudes in South Korea, however, the larger part of the South Korean public remains skeptical about the importance of deeper co-operation.

Abe’s strategic vision for the future of the Asia-Pacific region includes South Korea as an important component of the rule-based international order in the region. Besides, security co-operation among like-minded democracies would be less effective without South Korea. Although domestic public opinion is sometimes a barrier to genuine trilateral security co-operation, such a security framework would be a powerful tool to stabilize the Asia-Pacific region. Japan’s government should continue to encourage both domestic and international public opinion on the importance of promoting trilateral security co-operation.

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