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?

ESSAYS BY
Stephan Haggard & Myung-hwan Yu 8
T.J. Pempel 12
Jong-Yun Bae & Ki-Jung Kim 20
Akihiko Tanaka 24
Cheol Hee Park 30
Kazuhiko Tojo 34
Brad Glosserman 38
Yuichi Hosoya 42
Chung-in Moon & Won-young Hur 46
Daniel Bob 52
US-Japan-Korea Co-operation: Where Next?

By Stephan Haggard & Myung-hwan Yu

VIEWED FROM AFAR, trilateral co-operation between the US, Japan and South Korea would seem a relatively easy task. All three share at least some nervousness about China’s rise and the particular direction the country has taken under President Xi Jinping. All three are democratic and share a number of broad ideological commitments, from liberal democracy and human rights to a market economy. Certainly, even for optimists, history poses ongoing challenges. Whatever other problems Europe faces, a resurgence of Franco-German rivalry is not one of them. Countries of the heft of Japan and South Korea should similarly be able to move on.

Yet, viewed from within the region, the picture could not be more different. Attitudes toward the challenge posed by China — and how to respond to it — differ quite sharply among three countries that face quite different strategic landscapes. Despite broad political similarities, the political planets in the three countries do not necessarily align, with particular uncertainties emanating from the Donald Trump administration in the United States and a post-Park Geun-hye South Korea. History issues, finally, are looking more and more like family feuds that can be managed but are virtually impossible to resolve with any finality.

To interrogate the future of trilateral relations between the US and its two Northeast Asian allies, the Korea-Pacific Program and the Graduate School of Global Policy and Strategy at the University of California San Diego, with support from the Asia Research Fund and the Pacific Century Institute, pulled together a group of scholars and practitioners from both sides of the Pacific. The discussions focused on the three bundles of issues just outlined: strategic outlooks, particularly with respect to China; history; and domestic politics in each of the three countries. (An earlier symposium reported in Global Asia addressed economic issues in the region). The papers that follow show both the gains to be had from trilateral co-operation and some possible paths forward. They also show that two bilateral alliances do not necessarily add up to a wider alliance in the making, although that may be an asset rather than a liability for the region.

WHAT THE PAPERS SAY

T.J. Pempel kicks off the discussion of grand strategy by underlining the tensions in the US concept of the pivot, which contained elements of both engaging and balancing China. Although both are components of any US strategy towards Asia, each provokes diplomatic challenges. Engagement with Beijing leads to fears of abandonment in Tokyo, while balancing behavior provokes concerns that Seoul will be forced to choose sides between the major powers. The Trump administration may actually exacerbate both problems, with the president’s instincts for bluster co-existing with his sustained critique of the alliances during the election campaign.

Akihiko Tanaka as well as Jong-yun Bae and Ki-Jung Kim pick up these themes from the perspective of Japan and South Korea, respectively. Tanaka’s essay reflects the general strategic anxiety in Japan, as he walks through a succession of challenges, including direct military ones, in the Xi Jinping era. These concerns are not unrelated to the remarkable efforts on the part of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to build bridges to the new American president and the centrality that Tanaka puts on strengthening the alliance as the sine qua non for a fruitful relationship with Beijing. Yet, this Japanese lens would also like to see more forward co-operation with South Korea.

Bae and Kim, by contrast, underline the constraints on such co-operation from a South Korean perspective, and how obstacles cut across the right-left divide. South Koreans are wary of getting caught up in new Cold War structures, and not only because of their much greater economic reliance on China. Tighter trilateral co-operation with the US and Japan could restrict South Korea’s options with respect to North Korea, which is not viewed simply as an external threat but as a much deeper national question.

History issues complicate these considerations. Cheol-Hee Park strikes a positive tone by emphasizing the accomplishment of the comfort women deal, which required both sides to tone down nationalist appeals. Yet, he notes the fundamentally problematic nature of all such efforts: that it is impossible to credibly commit future governments — and generations — to put the issue to rest. Ambassador Kazuhiko Togo expresses concern about the status of the comfort women agreement under a new South Korean government, a theme picked up by Chung-in Moon and Won-young Hur in their essay on politics. But it is revealing that Togo also underlines the range of history issues that Japan has with China, issues that are being used as an instrument of Beijing’s diplomacy as well as an element of the Chinese Communist Party’s domestic political narrative emphasizing victimization. With respect to both countries, Togo raises a delicate but nonetheless crucial issue: that when China and Korea push history politics, the winners are not those disposed toward more positive relations but nationalists of various stripes.

Brad Glosserman, co-author with Scott Snyder of a new book on Japan-Korea history issues, takes a quite distinctive position on the history wars, arguing that the US should be more rather than less involved. Glosserman cites President Obama’s deft handling of reciprocal visits to Hiroshima and Pearl Harbor as a testament to how the US can lead by example. In these delicate visits, the president simultaneously acknowledged historical realities while looking beyond them to the present and future. Glosserman also makes a telling geopolitical point: that Japan’s most natural security partners are in the region. If Prime Minister Shinzo Abe wants to build those relationships, then continual massaging of history issues is not a luxury but a necessity.

By far the greatest uncertainties in Northeast Asia arise from how the three governments — not just the three countries — align. And by far the greatest uncertainties are being generated by the Trump administration in the US. Will he be pulled back to the bipartisan consensus that has governed US policy toward the region, including the centrality of alliances and an emphasis on the strategic benefits of economic interdependence? Or will his populist-nationalist views pull the US away from the pivot? Daniel Bobo rightly — if hopefully — places weight on US Secretary of Defense James Mattis’s “reassurance tour” and the generally positive tone of the Mar-a-Lago summit between Trump and Abe, replete with a quite public American endorsement of the alliance. Yet he also plays out the painful and likely fruitless efforts of Abe to reverse the...
What can we take away from this mixed picture on trilateral relations? A contrarian finding is that there may be a Goldilocks quality to optimal trilateral co-operation.

To be sure, none of the three countries benefit from tense diplomatic relations, eroding public confidence in the alliances and strains in the South Korea-Japan relationship. Yet it may also be the case that bilateral alliances are better able to deal with the distinctive concerns of the two quite different American allies.

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