

U.S. Alliances in Northeast Asia: Strong Partners with Deep Divisions

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Hearing on U.S. Alliances in Northeast Asia

U.S. alliances in Northeast Asia are critical to the success of our Asia strategy. These alliances are half a century old, with extensive agendas of economic and security cooperation. Japan and South Korea continue to host the bulk of our forward deployed forces in Asia, yet these are not just military alliances. The people of Japan and South Korea share our commitment to democratic values, to an open and fair global trading order, and to a cooperative approach to ensuring regional stability in a rapidly changing Asia Pacific.

Both Japan and South Korea have new political leaders: in December 2012, Abe Shinzo was elected prime minister after his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) gained a majority in Japan's Lower House of parliament and Park Geun-hye was elected to a five-year term as South Korea's president by a wide margin, assuming office in February 2013. Abe's LDP received overwhelming support in the Upper House election of parliament in the July 2013, giving the conservatives a majority in both houses of parliament for the first time since 2007. Park had led her Saenuri Party as it maintained its majority in the April 2012 legislative elections for the National Assembly. Thus both leaders have a strong electoral mandate, and will be in power for the next several years.

Unfortunately, the relationship between Tokyo and Seoul has deteriorated significantly, making it difficult for the United States to deepen and expand cooperation with its allies. Where once strong trilateral

cooperation between Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo could be expected across a wide range of issues, today that cooperation is less likely. For over a year now, the leaders of Japan and South Korea have not met.

Update on U.S.-ROK Alliance

The Republic of Korea continues to face an unstable and unpredictable regime in Pyongyang. Last fall, the United States and the Republic of Korea commemorated the 60th anniversary of their alliance and outlined plans for advancing the emerging global partnership between Washington and Seoul. The U.S.-ROK alliance has successfully deterred aggression by North Korea against the South on the Korean peninsula. Washington and Seoul work closely to craft and support the UN Security Council Resolutions that seek to sanction North Korean proliferation. After successive incidents in 2010 involving the use of force by Pyongyang against the South, the U.S.-ROK alliance has bolstered defense cooperation and strengthened their combined defense posture. In March 2013, the two governments completed their “counter provocation plan,” designed to anticipate and meet any further military actions by the North Koreans. In addition, last fall Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel and Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin approved a “tailored deterrence strategy” that would meet WMD threats from the North, and this includes the counter missile as well as the Korean Air and Missile Defense system.

The U.S.-ROK alliance also includes a global agenda of cooperation. Since 2009, in accordance with the Joint Vision for the alliance, the United States and South Korea have set forth a broader agenda of global cooperation, including partnering in developing mechanisms for ensuring global nuclear security. South Korea hosted the second Nuclear Security Summit in 2012. In addition, South Korea continues to expand its peacekeeping, post-conflict reconstruction, and disaster relief activities, and cooperates with the United States and others in Syria and Afghanistan. Future goals for the alliance include achieving the transition of wartime operational control (OPCON), deepening cooperation through their Cyber Cooperation Working Group, and continuing to implement base relocation and returns of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK).

Update on U.S.-Japan Alliance

The U.S.-Japan alliance has also confronted a new security challenge. Since 2012, China has begun maritime patrols of the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, challenging Japan’s administrative control. Rising tensions, and growing popular sensitivities over the islands, have frozen diplomatic relations between Tokyo and Beijing, and the increasing paramilitary patrols have upon occasion been supplemented by interactions between the two militaries.

[The United States has direct interests in this growing tension.](#) As Japan’s treaty ally, the United States has increased its defense cooperation with Tokyo (such as the deployment of F-22s in Okinawa and expanded training between U.S. and Japanese forces, including amphibious landing operations) to deter miscalculation, and has conveyed to Beijing in repeated high-level meetings (including between President Barack Obama and Chinese president Xi Jinping last year) the U.S. interest in a peaceful resolution of China’s maritime disputes with its neighbors. China’s announcement in November 2013 of a new Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea, however, puts new pressure on Japan’s air defenses (as well as South Korea’s) and exacerbates tensions over the Senkaku Islands.

The U.S.-Japan alliance has also begun an important set of revisions as Japan has initiated its own defense reforms. In October, Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary of Defense Hagel traveled to Tokyo for a Security Consultative Committee (2+2) meeting with Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida and Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera. The highlights of that meeting included an agreement to revise the U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation Guidelines to enhance the alliance deterrent (especially with intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities). A review of roles, missions, and capabilities will supplement the discussion of the Guidelines, as will a review in Japan of the government's interpretation of the Constitution with regard to the right of collective self-defense.

Finally, Japan's economic policy reforms, dubbed "Abenomics," have had some initial success in raising expectations for an improved economic performance. A combination of fiscal stimulus and a new emphasis on monetary policy combined to stimulate greater optimism in Japan's economic future. Breaking the deflationary mindset is seen as the prerequisite to greater investment and consumer spending. Early signs of traction in 2013 were apparent, but much will depend on the Abe government's ability to tackle the more politically difficult economic restructuring Japan needs to truly turn its economy around. Japan's decision last year to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) is widely seen as one of Prime Minister Abe's best policy tools for opening the market and restoring economic competitiveness.

Challenges for 2014

The United States has several challenges ahead in managing its alliance relations in Northeast Asia. First, both alliances will need continued attention to defense cooperation. Regional security trends make alliance readiness and strategic adjustments to the alliance deterrent necessary. The United States and Japan will revise their Defense Cooperation Guidelines to consider new missions and upgrade capabilities based on their strategic assessment of regional military balance. Tensions in the East China Sea and the continued concern over the situation on the Korean peninsula will require continued attention to crisis management provisions and to reassess the alliance readiness. Force posture adjustment continues to be necessary, as are upgrades in alliance deterrence (such as the on-going improvements in ISR and ballistic missile defense capabilities). Japan's own reorientation of its defense posture southward will also shape alliance cooperation. In the U.S.-ROK alliance, the most important consultations continue to be over whether to transition OPCON from the USFK to the Korean military. The nature and timing of this transfer, of course, will be conditions based, and should be undertaken in order to ensure a seamless combined deterrent force. The potential for provocations from the North cannot be underestimated, especially near the Northern Limit Line (NLL), and close allied consultations on how to anticipate and respond to such provocations remains a high priority. Finally, the potential for intermediate range missile and/or nuclear testing remains, and the continued ability to deter (including extended deterrence) is crucial to regional stability.

Second, economic cooperation continues to be an important component in our alliance cooperation. The TPP negotiations are a critical component of U.S.-Japan cooperation. Recent slowing of progress rests largely on two requirements. The first is that the lack of trade promotion authority prompts concerns over the ability of the Obama administration to gain Congressional approval of a final agreement. Second, the desire for a high standards agreement limits the U.S. willingness for compromise, particularly on Japanese agriculture. Domestic politics in both countries could undercut the U.S.-Japan cooperation that to date had enabled progress on this important economic security initiative. The United States and South Korea now

enjoy the benefits of their free trade agreement (KORUS), approved by the U.S. Congress and the Korean Assembly at the end of 2011. Differences remain over some sectors, but overall trade has improved.

Finally, energy cooperation will also be on the alliance agenda this year, and with both allies, energy has a strategic impact. The United States and South Korea will continue to discuss their civilian nuclear cooperation, and expectations remain high that a new agreement can be reached. Additional time was granted by the Senate in January 2014 to allow a more careful discussion. Japan too has new energy needs after its triple disasters in 2011 changed the national consensus on the country's overall energy mix. Exports of U.S. liquefied natural gas (LNG) and potentially other energy resources to Japan should be considered, as they will transform Japan's dependence on Russia and the Middle East for the bulk of its imported energy needs.

Bilateral Cooperation Between Tokyo and Seoul

Perhaps the thorniest issue for U.S. foreign policy in Northeast Asia continues to be the difficult relations between Seoul and Tokyo. Since coming into office, President Park and Prime Minister Abe have failed to organize a high-level summit meeting, and as a result, domestic sentiments within each country have become increasingly antagonistic. Several factors account for the deterioration in this important bilateral relationship. First, the continuing sensitivity particularly in South Korea to issues related to historical memory impedes closer security cooperation. In 2012, the two nations were close to concluded two important security agreements, an information sharing agreement and an acquisitions and cross-servicing agreement (ACSA) that would have allowed cooperation in case of a contingency on the peninsula. Domestic politics in South Korea derailed this effort, however.

Second, the visit in 2012 of former Korean president Lee Myung-bak to the island of Dokdo (Takeshima for the Japanese) inflamed popular sentiment in Japan, as did President Lee's statements on Japan's lack of remorse for its colonization of the Korean peninsula. The change of leadership in Seoul only deepened the rift as President Park continues to advocate to others the need for Japan to reflect on its past and take a more "correct understanding of history." Pressures within South Korea, largely led by court cases appealing for greater South Korean government activism to gain new compensation for victims of Japanese oppression during World War II, continue to make this a contentious issue, and sentiment in Japan toward South Korea has worsened considerably. The 50th anniversary of the bilateral peace treaty between Japan and South Korea next year will focus attention on this sensitive issue of remorse and compensation for WWII.

Finally, the rise of China is deepening the difficulties in the Japan-South Korea relationship. President Park began her time in office by visiting Washington and Beijing, but ignoring South Korea's longstanding diplomatic ties to Tokyo. Moreover, in high-level meetings with China, South Korean officials join with China to chastise Japan on its past history, creating the impression that Seoul and Beijing seek to isolate Japan diplomatically. While the historical legacy of World War II has long been a source of pain and friction in the diplomatic relations between Japan and South Korea, the growing synchronization of territorial disputes and criticism of Japanese leaders' positions on history between Seoul and Beijing make it difficult for Tokyo to manage. Popular sentiments in Tokyo have become very sensitive to this notion that Japan is the target of attack by its neighbors, just as popular sentiments in Seoul have become very sensitive to Japanese revisionist statements on the conflicts of the 20th century.

The U.S. role in these tensions is a difficult one. While U.S. interests are not served by the continuing estrangement between our two closest allies in Asia, Washington cannot broker a deal on the complex issue of historical memory. For reconciliation to occur, it must be undertaken directly by Tokyo and Seoul. Nonetheless, the United States must continue to urge President Park and Prime Minister Abe to take steps toward a concrete discussion on reconciliation, and to outline to both leaders the costs of their continued contention. Without leadership by both Park and Abe, this dispute could become much more difficult to resolve, and could undermine their ability to manage their own country's security. A comprehensive review of the path to restoring strong political and economic ties must be undertaken, and no preconditions to dialogue should be set.

The lost opportunities of this continued friction are real for the United States, and for the region. Close trilateral cooperation on North Korea is vital in case of a crisis or even worse, a conflict. U.S. access to bases in Japan is imperative to our ability to defend South Korea. Korean cooperation with Japan will be vital to ensuring the safety of Japanese citizens on the peninsula and in deterring North Korean aggression against Japan. Likewise, maritime cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo is essential for nonproliferation activities, as well as broader stability of East China Sea. Japan and Korea have a long history of coast guard and air defense cooperation, and should see this as an added stabilizer for the East China Sea, especially after the ADIZ. Furthermore, the ability of Tokyo and Seoul to cooperate in and around the East China Sea should become the basis for encouraging Chinese participation in similar risk reduction mechanisms, perhaps through the trilateral China, Japan, South Korea summitry. Finally, the frictions over their postwar settlement ultimately do affect the United States. More and more, U.S. citizens are raising questions about the historical disputes between Japan and South Korea, including the issue of compensation for the system of sexual slavery during WWII, and wondering about the rising nationalist impulses of both countries. There is plenty of room for non-governmental discussions between U.S. and regional historians on some of these issues, and for U.S. engagement in a broader Asian discussion of historical memory. Our own leadership in demonstrating the importance of historical reconciliation has been a source of strengthening our relations with both countries. In both Korea and Japan, we must continue to emphasize the importance of reconciliation.

What More Can Be Done?

President Obama's visit to both countries in April offers an opportunity to highlight the strengths not only of our bilateral ties, but also of the value of our trilateral partnership for regional security and prosperity. Elected representatives in Congress too should take every opportunity to demonstrate the importance of these alliances to the United States. Personal ties with the leaders of Japan and South Korea will allow for a more intimate dialogue on issues of reconciliation, and will allow for greater understanding of the changing security and economic concerns in the region. The United States has a tremendous stake in Asia, and our partnerships with both of these vibrant democracies and dynamic economies are indispensable to our own success. With Seoul and Tokyo, we have shared interests in a broad agenda of cooperation across the Asia Pacific: freedom of navigation, the rule of law, an open and fair international economy, and the right of self-determination and territorial integrity. Finally, we must continue to invest in the next generation of alliance leaders, and the United States must continue to lean forward in funding, educating, and sending abroad our very best young minds. Building the personal relationships, and learning first hand about these two

accomplished cultures, is one of the best means of ensuring the health of our relationships with Japan and South Korea in the generations ahead.