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Benjamin Engel

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The East Asia Institute
#909 Sampoong B/D
158 Eulji-ro, Jung-gu
Seoul 04548
Republic of Korea

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www.eai.or.kr

ROK-Japan Relations, the Weak Link in ROK-U.S.-Japan Trilateral Cooperation

Sook-Jong Lee

EAI President / Sungkyunkwan University

Trilateral ROK-U.S.-Japan relations are based on the two strong ROK-U.S. and U.S.-Japan bilateral alliances, but the bond between the ROK and Japan is weak. According to relationship theory, if there is a shared friend in a trilateral relationship that consists of two bilateral relationships, then links will develop and three strong and positive relationships will emerge. However, the need to turn downtrodden ROK-Japan relations into a strong bond defies logic.

With a strong neighbor in China and historical issues, tensions over which are as high as ever, causing the ROK-Japan gap to widen, the breadth of ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral cooperation has its limits. The agreement announced on December 28, 2015 between the Korean and Japanese governments on wartime sexual slavery is generating an expectation that this trilateral relationship will be strengthened as the Korea-Japan bilateral relationship is normalized. However, hope can turn to disappointment if we consider a public opinion survey jointly carried out last summer by the East Asia Institute, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, and Genron NPO.

Warm Toward U.S., Cold Toward Each Other

In a fashion similar to the relationships between the governments over the last several years, public opinion toward the trilateral ROK-U.S.-Japan relationship continued to show a predisposition toward two separate bilateral relations. 71 percent of Koreans and 69 percent of Japanese felt their country's

relationship with the U.S. was very important.

If we combine these answers with those who felt relations with the U.S. were "somewhat important," then overwhelming majorities, 98 percent of Koreans and 84 percent of Japanese, view the U.S. as important. However, only 34 percent of Koreans thought relations with Japan were very important (50 percent answered somewhat important) and 32 percent of Japanese respondents felt relations with the ROK were very important (42 percent answered they were somewhat important) which is less than half of the number of responses that stated the relationship with the U.S. was very important. (In the U.S., 52 percent of respondents said relations with Japan were very important while 41 percent said relations with the ROK were very important. If combined with those who answered "somewhat important" then the total is 88 percent and 83 percent respectively.)

When asked about each country's ability to handle world issues responsibly, the respondents in the ROK and Japan were generous toward the U.S. with 87 percent and 81 percent responding positively. But only 48 percent of Koreans answered positively about Japan's ability to handle world issues and only 25 percent of Japanese were confident in the ROK's abilities.

Koreans and Japanese also have different views on China. 71 percent of Koreans thought China was dealing with world issues responsibly while only 15 percent of Japanese answered in this manner.

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When asked whether the influence of China will increase in the next ten years, 80 percent of Koreans answered affirmatively while only 60 percent of Japanese did the same. This result indicates that while the rise of China is providing both opportunities and danger, it seems Koreans gravitate toward viewing it as an opportunity while the Japanese see rising China as a threat. It also signifies that Koreans approach their relationship with China through an economic lens while the Japanese view China with national security in mind.

When asked about how to improve relations with China, 70 percent of Koreans answered that the strengthening of economic ties was important while only 16 percent answered that strengthening political and security relations was necessary. In Japan, only 20 percent thought stronger economic relations were key while the most common response was strengthening political and security relations with 22 percent.

Previously Japan also had a view of China that sought to give priority to practical economic concerns, but, since the 1990s, this has gradually given way to the idea of China as a threat. This threat perception peaked surrounding the dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Given this, Japan has been resolutely pushing ahead its security legislation while planning to contribute to the increase of the U.S. deterrent toward China.

The ROK on the one hand needs to deepen its cooperation with China on the economy and the North Korea issue. On the other hand it also needs to expand the alliance with the U.S. while at the same time struggle to avoid participating in the U.S. containment of China. Therefore, in terms of security cooperation in the ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral relationship, it seems the effort by the U.S. can have some effect on the North Korea issue but not on containing China.

Cooperation Should Expand to Global Stage

Because of opposition in the ROK to an agreement with Japan on sharing military intelligence, the ROK and Japan brought the U.S. into the agreement and are now planning cooperation on security issues concerning North Korea. Nevertheless, Korean public opinion is not keen on the U.S. defensive support of Japan.

Koreans overwhelming support the deployment of U.S. troops in the scenario of a North Korean invasion of the ROK with 91 percent giving their consent. However only 35 percent support the deployment of U.S. troops in the case of a North Korean attack on Japan and a mere 27 percent support the use of U.S. troops in a conflict between Japan and China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. On the other hand, 71 percent of Japanese citizens agree with the deployment of U.S. troops in the case of a North Korean attack on Japan and 56 percent would want American assistance if a conflict with China arose over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. The Japanese also have a relatively higher perception of the U.S. defense role on the Korean Peninsula with 57 percent of Japanese supporting a U.S. deployment of troops in the case of a North Korean invasion of the South. Americans supported deployment of their own troops at nearly the same level in cases of North Korean attacks against the ROK or Japan at 48 percent and 47 percent respectively. The support for the deployment of troops during a Japan-China clash over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands was relatively lower at 33 percent.

After the passage of the so-called emergency legislation (a structure of laws preparing in advance for emergency situations), Japan has begun to give shape to the types of scenarios in which the Self-Defense Forces could be used.

During a meeting between ROK and

Japanese defense ministers this past October, the Japanese Defense Minister invited criticism by stating, “Given that the scope of territory effectively controlled by the ROK is only that south of the armistice line, even though constitutionally North Korea is part of South Korea, there is no need to receive permission from the ROK before Japanese Self-Defense Forces enter North Korea.” In truth, in terms of respecting the right to self-defense as ensured by the UN, it does not seem possible for the ROK to oppose Japan’s defensive activities through a consent procedure in the case of a North Korean attack on Japan.

However, using an imaginary scenario that has little chance of actually coming to fruition to put the ROK government, which must protect its constitutional territorial sovereignty, in an awkward position is politically a foolish thing to do. If Japan really wished to insist on defining some rules in the case of a North Korean attack, they could enter into military consultations with the ROK and together with the U.S. devise plans based on the type of attack.

In the same way, the ROK must understand the feelings of Japan which is threatened by North Korean nuclear weapons and missiles and respect their legal right to self defense. If the ROK, U.S., and Japan wish to substantially cooperate on North Korea policy, then the security of the ROK and Japan needs a diffusion of empathy leading to greater security through closer relations and mutual assistance.

The areas in which cooperation between the ROK, U.S., and Japan are relatively likely are fields such as democracy, health, environmental issues, and development assistance in third countries or in international society.

The three countries, based on their shared democratic values, can work together

on protecting democracy around the world. They can display synergy on disaster relief efforts given their excellent human resources in health, and as some of the main carbon emitting countries they need to learn from each other to produce more environmentally friendly technology and policies. Also, given that the U.S. and Japan are some of the main aid providing countries and Korea is a new donor country, there are many areas in which they can cooperate in order to support developing countries. Trilateral cooperation between the ROK, U.S., and Japan does not have to be limited to the Korean Peninsula or East Asia. If the “value alliance” of the three countries expands to the global level, the future of trilateral cooperation looks bright. Japanese commitment and credibility in resolving the wartime atrocity issue remains a primary condition to advance this value side of trilateral cooperation. ■

— Sook-Jong Lee is the EAI President, and a professor at Sungkyunkwan University. Currently, Dr. Lee holds advisory positions in the South Korean government, including the Presidential National Security Advisory Group, Presidential Committee for Unification Preparation and councils for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Unification, and the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA). She also participates as member of the Trilateral Commission, Council of Councils, and many other transnational networks on research and policy studies. Dr. Lee received her B.A. from Yonsei University, and M.A. and Ph.D. in sociology from Harvard University.

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