

## Smart Talk No. 45

### Moderator

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This product presents a policy-oriented summary of the Smart Talk.

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## Korean Foreign Policy: A Roundtable

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On March 22, 2016, the East Asia Institute invited Bruce Jacobs, professor emeritus at Monash University, to discuss South Korea's perception of China and its China policy. This forum focused on three guiding questions posed by Prof. Jacobs: (1) what was behind South Korea's decision not to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations; (2) how can South Korea improve its relations with Japan and how are ROK-Japan relations different from Taiwan-Japan relations; and (3) what are the expected roles of China in the unification of the Korean peninsula. The following are some of the main points of the discussion.

### Summary of the Seminar

The discussion started with a provocative question on whether South Korea's initial hesitation in joining the TPP was due to a general lack of belief in free trade. In response to this question, participants suggested several explanations. In the practical sense, the Korean government was already at a final stage of bilateral free trade agreements (FTAs) with ten out of the twelve TPP members when the U.S. invited South Korea to take part in the TPP as a founding member in December 2010. Transfer of authority over trade from Ministry of Foreign Affairs (formerly Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade) to the Ministry of Trade, Industry & Energy under the new Park Geun-hye administration in 2013 also slowed the process of understanding South Korea's position and strategic advantages within the TPP. Participants pointed out that President Park's policy was to "realign" with China, which was the opposite of what former President Lee Myung-bak pursued in his administration; the government was trying to avoid actions that would be perceived unfavorably by China, such as joining the TPP,

as many would regard its involvement as a manifestation of "norm competition" between the U.S. and China. A majority of participants agreed that South Korea's lack of human resources and capacity and a high sensitivity towards China were the most likely motives for not joining the TPP negotiations at the initial stage.

As for the current relations between South Korea and Japan, there is stronger distrust towards Japan on the Korean side compared to the Taiwanese side, albeit the fact that both South Korea and Taiwan share similarly painful histories of colonialism under Japan. The South Korean public as well as the government would not only like to see Japan and South Korea resolve past history problems such as the comfort women issue, but also to have a clear vision of Japan's grand strategy for Asia, which is currently overshadowed by Japan's palpable efforts to strengthen ties with the U.S. One participant emphasized that comparison of past atrocities experienced by South Korea and Taiwan is not helpful in addressing why South Korea, despite similar experiences with colonialism, has stronger hostility towards Japan and why a virtual alliance between the two governments is unlikely. A participant went further by stating that it is very unlikely for South Korea to join any type of "democratic alliances" in which Japan also participates. It was pointed out that in the end, national interests override feelings of the past, as indicated by the fact that there appeared to be less enmity towards Japan during the Park Chung-hee era.

Lastly, the discussion centered around the question of what role China must, can, and will play in the unification process of the Korean peninsula. An observation by the Korean government that South Korea needs China for unification marked the beginning of

this discussion. On one hand, some participants argued that unification cannot happen if China opposes because of North Korea's economic dependence on China, China's preferred status of North Korea as a "strategic buffer state," and the inability of South Korea to promise that a Seoul-led unified Korea would maintain such a buffer state status. On the other hand, others pointed out that it is unnecessary to obtain Chinese approval for unification to proceed, looking back at the experience of Germany with only the U.S. as the main supporter. While the unification process 'forced upon' North Korea is unlikely to happen without approval from China, some participants agreed that in the case of a successful South-North Korean rapprochement and mutual trust built to such extent that both South and North Korea agree on the terms of unification, the process can take place even without Chinese approval. The discussion clearly demonstrated that expectations that China will play an active role in unifying the Korean Peninsula depend on the kind of unification that will actually take place as well as the future direction of U.S.-China relations. Putting too much confidence in South Korea's capability to change the current Chinese stance on North Korea as a strategic buffer is far-fetched, as is the assumption that China will change its position anytime soon without reassurance that a unified Korea will not displace the buffer status of North Korea.

As the three guiding questions are inevitably linked to the "rise of China," participants engaged in a free discussion on China and North Korea afterwards. It was noted that recent North Korean actions like the January missile launch also estranged China, which makes it even harder to anticipate China's behavior on the North Korean issues. One participant further questioned the frequently applied comparison between the German unification and the possible Korean case. It was argued that because of the overburdening cost of the latter unification due to the under-developed nature

of the North Korean economy and a completely different global political setting, the attempt to take lessons from the German case appears to be of limited value. Another comparison was drawn on China's behavior in the cross-strait issues with Taiwan and the Korean Peninsula. All in all, participants remained rather pessimistic for a Korean unification in the near future. North Korea, they deemed, will not give in to the demand for denuclearization, but only to higher arms control at best. The U.S. and South Korea on the other side are not likely to drop this demand as a prerequisite for further talks and a peace treaty, while it is of China's interest to first make North Korea join in the negotiation table to reach a peace treaty; one of the ways to do so is by forgoing the denuclearization agenda. An answer on how to overcome this puzzle is yet to be found.

Wrapping up the discussion on the current South Korean foreign policy towards its neighbors and its increasingly closer relations with China, a participant took a look back to history and pointed out that the Chinese idea of its place as the center of civilization may influence the recurring Sino-centric attitude China possesses towards other states in Asia, including South Korea. This, he remarked, is why in the near future South Korea should exercise caution not to cater into Chinese interests too extensively. ■

## **About the Participants**

### **Moderator**

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