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**Allied with a Declining Hegemon?  
South Korea's Choices in the Washington-Seoul-Tokyo Triad**

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It seems that the third Nuclear Security Summit (NSS) hosted in the Hague, Netherlands, will be remembered as a forum for resolving regional upheavals rather than enhancing nuclear security. Building on the commitments of previous summits in Washington and Seoul, fifty-three leaders from around the world and four representatives from international organizations adopted the Hague Communiqué. They decided to continue individual and collective efforts to secure fissile materials and prevent nuclear terrorism. The noble cause of nuclear security, however, was not the top priority for most of the global leaders participating in the event. They spent much more time discussing serious ongoing regional challenges, such as the crisis in Ukraine. As the NSS gathers together most of the significant actors in global politics, it is increasingly considered by leaders to be a valuable venue for holding dialogues on numerous regional issues beyond nuclear security.

President Barack Obama was among the leaders in attendance with alternate priorities. He convened a series of meetings with leaders from the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to deliberate over countermeasures for the Crimean crisis, which was followed by a short visit to Riyadh in Saudi Arabia to discuss problems with Syria and Iran. Although reducing nuclear arsenals and preventing nuclear terrorism were the imperative goals for the United States when it first invited all the relevant world leaders to Washington four years ago, the issue of

nuclear security has now become marginalized by the exigent challenges that are simultaneously taking place in different regions. The priorities displayed during the Hague NSS demonstrate the challenges that Washington is currently facing in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia.

As the convener of the previous NSS meeting in 2012, South Korea is naturally expected to be interested in follow-up measures for strengthening nuclear security. However, it was the U.S.-Korea-Japan trilateral summit held on the sidelines of the Hague NSS that was most important to Seoul. The meeting lasted for only forty-five minutes, thereby limiting the scope of the discussion to the North Korea nuclear issue. In terms of depth, it only confirmed the basic principles that the three countries have so far maintained. But the real importance of the event was to lay a stepping stone for improving the Korea-Japan relations that have been seriously jeopardized since Park Geun-hye and Abe Shinzo came to power in 2012. Washington requires a certain level of reconciliation in the mood between South Korea and Japan before Obama's upcoming visits to Tokyo and Seoul in April 2014.

For the success of the Obama administration's Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy, securing close collaboration between Seoul and Tokyo - the two strongest U.S. allies in Asia - is the utmost priority. The gravity of the recent turmoil in world politics has added more urgency in accomplishing this task.

## Washington on the Testing Ground: Ukraine, the Middle East, and East Asia

The Ukraine crisis was the key agenda during the Hague Summit. The leaders of the Group of Seven (G7) announced “the Hague Declaration” on March 24 and suspended their participation in the Sochi Group of Eight (G8) Summit. Instead, they decided to hold a meeting in the G7 format in Brussels in June, excluding Russia.

The United States and the European countries condemned Russia’s annexation of Crimea and defined the action as a serious violation of Ukraine’s sovereignty, international law, and the international obligations of the “Budapest Memorandum.” The leaders of the G7 made it clear that Moscow’s illegal attempt will have grave consequences and declared that they will intensify sanctions against Russia. On the other hand, the G7 countries promised to expedite economic support to Ukraine and reinforce military backing to Georgia and Moldova. Interestingly, world leaders who had gathered to discuss transnational issues of nuclear security were actually engrossed in measures to frustrate Russia’s geopolitical expansion based on the balance-of-power logic, the classic thinking of modern international politics.

At first glance, the U.S. and EU countries seem to be on the same page, but there is a greater cleavage between them than it appears. Although EU states are joining U.S.-led economic sanctions against Russia for now, it is an excessive burden for them to remain arrayed against Moscow as enemies. The EU repeatedly emphasizes that its economic measures against Russia do not aim to punish but to encourage Moscow to adjust its course of action. As European countries are substan-

tially dependent on Russian natural gas, it is a vulnerable proposition for them to reduce economic ties with Moscow without first securing alternative energy sources. The last thing that the European states would like to see is European regional politics turning into a clash between NATO and Russia over Ukraine. They want to avoid an escalation of the Crimea situation into a NATO-Russia military confrontation.

Does Washington have any resources to mitigate the concerns of its European partners? Obviously, the United States does not hold many cards to play against Russia, except suspending visa issuance, freezing financial assets, or revoking its G8 membership. Military options are unrealistic considering Russia’s nuclear capability. Furthermore, the United States needs to overcome the possible suspicions of the European countries that hard line policies against Russia are U.S.-centric and only serve the interests of Washington. The United States is aware of this. During the Summit with European leaders, Obama mentioned U.S. shale gas as a possible alternative energy source when he emphasized the need to diversify the EU nations’ energy imports while reducing their dependence over Russian natural gas. Although he made it clear that the U.S. government had no authority to make a company support a government initiative and directly interfere in the free energy market, it seems obvious Washington pondered incentive measures that could be appealing to Europe.

Russia’s annexation of Crimea is only one part of a bigger story. American willpower and its capability to restore U.S. leadership over world politics by making strategic adjustments are being simultaneously tested in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and East

*“Russia’s annexation of Crimea is only one part of a bigger story. American willpower and its capability to restore U.S. leadership over world politics by making strategic adjustments are being simultaneously tested in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia.”*

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Asia. Facing the post-unipolar order, will U.S. diplomacy be capable of re-proportioning its share of geopolitical leadership with other regional great powers? Will Washington maintain a U.S.-led world order by supporting its allies and strategic partners? Can the United States play a crucial role in resolving regional challenges in Europe and the Middle East while enhancing its commitment to Asia?

Unfortunately, the strategic environment is not entirely favorable for Washington. The United States is losing its presence in Middle East regional politics. It failed to lead the collective effort to impose sanctions against the Syrian regime for its use of chemical weapons. Even support from U.S. alliance partners such as Israeli and Saudi Arabia is not as strong as before. It is still unclear whether the ongoing nuclear deal with Iran will be beneficial or detrimental to its Middle East policy. As in Europe, U.S. willpower and capability to exert leadership over regional geopolitics has been challenged in the Middle East.

As the situation grows worse, Washington faces pressing needs for supports from more trustworthy friends. Obama's message has been consistent from the Hague to Riyadh: the United States needs help. It is difficult for a retrenching Washington to regain its hegemonic influence without support from its allies and partners in the EU, NATO, and the Middle East. The U.S.-Korea-Japan trilateral summit was held in the same vein. Without securing a well-coordinated division of labor among the three countries, Washington has to invest enormous assets to fulfill the commitments of its Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy. Just as Washington faces a possible division among its partners of the EU and NATO over the Ukraine crisis, the Korea-Japan divide is equally as problematic.

China is at the center of gravity for the U.S. rebalance to Asia. Close cooperation with Beijing is indispensable not only for revitalizing the U.S. economy but also for dealing with global challenges, including climate change and cyber security. During the U.S.-China summit at the Hague, Obama and Xi confirmed that the two countries would promote their strategic collaboration under the banner of “a new type of great power relations.” However, the geopolitical rivalry between the two great powers continues. China persistently makes every effort to expand its influence over neighboring countries that it believes are under Beijing's strategic scope, especially in the East and South China Sea areas. Proactive and unilateral actions by China, including the declaration of its Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) last late November, provoke concerns from neighboring countries. Will the United States be able to prove its willpower and capability to protect its allies in the region when China follows up its assertive actions and turns them into the status quo as a *fait accompli* as Russia did in Crimea? The U.S. response to China's assertiveness over the ADIZ is quite disappointing for Japan. If Washington fails to win the confidence of its partners in Asia on its commitment to the region, their support for U.S. policies will fade sooner or later, considering their massive economic dependence on China. East Asian countries are far more vulnerable to China's economic retaliation compared to the EU states' susceptibility to Russian whims in cutting energy supplies. This demonstrates the dual challenge that faces Washington in managing tensions with China and enhancing strategic solidarity among East Asian allies at the same time.

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## **Strategic Fine-Tuning of Washington and Seoul’s Future Tasks**

The recent efforts of the United States to mediate between South Korea and Japan are derived from its overall strategic calculation. In order to realize its strategic design in Asia, Washington needs both South Korea and Japan. Washington may hope to correct the distorted historical views of the Abe administration, but its priority lies in improving Korea-Japan relations that can lead to an enhanced Washington-Seoul-Tokyo trilateral collaboration. What the Obama administration wants to see is not the seriousness of Japanese efforts to improve its relationship with South Korea but any actions possible to mitigate the emotional confrontation between them.

South Korea needs to understand the subtle picture that lies below the surface. The Park administration should carefully calculate the feasible level of support it can receive from Washington regarding the historical issue with the Abe administration. It is a quixotic approach to expect the continuous development of the U.S.-Korea alliance partnership while persistently ignoring Washington’s request to increase coordination among members of the U.S. alliance system in the region. In the end, the Park administration needs to solve the quadratic equation of correcting Abe’s historical perspectives as well as utilizing the Washington-Seoul-Tokyo collaboration for South Korea’s regional strategy. It is critical to precisely understand the position of the United States during this process.

South Korea’s urgent task for the future of U.S.-Korea-Japan trilateral cooperation is to map out its regional strategy in East Asia. It is

Seoul that will suffer most if the U.S.-China rivalry turns into a military confrontation and the “tragedy of great power politics” dominates the dynamics of East Asian politics. South Korea should lead the way in establishing a mechanism to promote collaboration among great powers, and subsequently promote stable transformation that can minimize the negative impact of the power shift. Seoul and Washington can share a common perception and develop a coordinated policy regarding Japan’s strategic role in the region only when they are on the same page in terms of regional strategic vision and, particularly, China policy. It is also important to approach the history issue within the context of regional strategic footing and convince the United States of the necessity of a sincere Japanese apology for the history issue in order to guarantee the success of the U.S. rebalancing strategy. This is the way to find a common denominator among the Asia strategy of the U.S., Korea’s Japan policy, and Washington-Seoul-Tokyo trilateral cooperation. ■

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