

Regional Implications of the 21 May U.S.-South Korea-Japan Trilateral Meeting

Written by Stephanie Nayoung Kang

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STEPHANIE NAYOUNG KANG, JUN 13 2012

On May 21, delegates from the United States, Republic of Korea (ROK) and Japan held a trilateral meeting in Seoul to discuss North Korea's nuclear program and its recent provocations. The trilateral talks involved senior officials from each of the three countries, including ROK chief nuclear envoy, Lim Sung-nam; director-general of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau, Shinsuke Sugiyama; and the U.S. special representative for North Korean policy, Glyn Davies.[1] The recent trilateral meeting shows the three countries' commitment to addressing the North Korean nuclear issue, but it also raises broader questions and implications regarding US-ROK-Japan relations and the future role of China. A closer examination of the May 21 trilateral meeting may provide insight on underlying issues within current policy approaches towards North Korea and Pyongyang's potential response to pressures arising from the international community.

Pyongyang's recent provocations – highlighted by its April 13 rocket launch – have caused the major powers in the region to rethink their national strategies towards the North. Ambassador Davies reaffirmed the unified stance of the Six-Party members against North Korea's nuclear program and reiterated the US' interest in maintaining close cooperation with South Korea and Japan as “a reflection, not just of [the] alliance relationship which is very important, but also [their] common interests and values across the Asia Pacific and the world.”[2] Yet public statements of unity may belie underlying issues for policy coordination between the region's actors.

In the trilateral meeting, the delegates of the US, ROK and Japan presented a unified message to Pyongyang by condemning its recent actions and pressuring it to take a “different path.”[3] The North Korean regime has been an adroit user of the ‘wedge strategy’ to expose weaknesses in the relations between major powers by playing one off the other[4] –thus driving a wedge between them. As a result, the US has recognized the importance of displays of trilateral unity “to help isolate and pressure Pyongyang” and to “keep the three governments aligned” in their policy approaches towards North Korea.[5] But history has proven that despite common threats and interests, ROK-Japan relations continue to be the weakest leg of triangular relations and this may present challenges for future policy coordination between the three countries.[6] In 1999, the three countries formalized their meetings into the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) based on the policy recommendations of then-U.S. North Korea policy coordinator, William Perry.[7] Yet over time, the TCOG suffered from differing policy approaches towards Pyongyang between the three countries and has largely become an informal process with limited policy outcomes.[8] Although the US, ROK and Japan have presently coordinated their North Korea policies to an extent, the upcoming elections in South Korea and the United States may produce significant changes in leadership and, as a result, changes in policies towards North Korea and towards trilateralism in general. In particular, a progressive shift in the ROK government may usher in antagonism towards Japan based on its colonial past and Korean nationalist sentiments.[9] Thus, it is important for future trilateral meetings to reiterate common goals and procedures in dealing with the North and for the US to mediate diplomatic relations between its allies, Japan and South Korea.

In addition to reaffirming the importance of maintaining US-ROK-Japan relations, the trilateral meeting also highlights China's key role in addressing the North Korean nuclear issue. In recent years, China has strengthened its relations with North Korea through high-level bilateral meetings and increased economic cooperation.[10] However, closer ties with Pyongyang have led to a “reluctance to criticize the North” as witnessed by Beijing's “tepid public reactions” to

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the Cheonan sinking and the Yeonpyeong Island shelling in 2010.[11] In light of China's subdued responses to the North's provocations, the US, South Korea and Japan agreed to pressure Beijing to adopt a stronger stance against further provocations and to reduce economic aid to Pyongyang.[12] The gap in policy approaches towards North Korea between the US and its allies on one side and China on the other is steadily growing. In a joint statement made at the most recent China-Japan-South Korea trilateral summit, references to North Korea were omitted due to Japanese and South Korean governments' criticisms of China's "soft wording".[13] The US, ROK and Japan are largely pursuing policies of enforcement towards Pyongyang as seen by the three countries' calls for reciprocity, pressuring the North to choose a "different path", and condemnation of its nuclear program and tests. Although China's policy towards Pyongyang is not as clear, it is evident that a divergence of policy within the Six-Party process is occurring and will have significant effects on future negotiations. The question remains whether or not trilateral pressure from the US, South Korea and Japan on China to adopt a more responsible role can, or will, produce changes in Chinese policy towards North Korea.

Another important question to ask is: what is in store for North Korea in light of the recent trilateral meeting and rising pressures against China's 'benign' policies? A renewed display of trilateral unity between Washington and its allies will create a pressure point for Pyongyang – especially in its current state of uncertainty and transition. If Washington restricts bilateral talks with Pyongyang (as it did in the first Bush administration)[14] and coordinates policies of enforcement with its allies in Tokyo and Seoul, the Kim regime may feel cornered and either cast aside opportunities for negotiation or invoke further provocations. Trilateral pressure on China might also cause North Korea to question its re-entry into the Six-Party Talks. If Beijing feels pressured enough to adopt stricter policies towards North Korea, Pyongyang may feel that it is losing its closest ally in the region. Such insecurities and doubts within the North Korean regime may cause it to seek domestic stability through its own actions (i.e. national displays of strength) rather than diplomatic negotiations with regional partners. Yet internal uncertainties and a lack of transparency in the North Korean government make it hard to predict how North Korea will perceive and react to any given situation, including the recent trilateral meeting.

The complexity of interwoven relationships between the region's actors, different perceptions of threat and national policy, and North Korea's own changing internal environment have made policy coordination towards Pyongyang difficult. Trilateral meetings between the US, South Korea and Japan emphasize the need for greater security cooperation among countries with common threats and interests, but underlying issues from the past cannot be ignored. Although the Six-Party Talks are in a current impasse and North Korea refuses to participate, collective efforts among the remaining five members in the Six-Party process should aim to "have the same understanding, the same analysis of the situation... [talk] about various contingencies; and... know how it is that [the member states] will react if there are future provocations." [15] A balanced policy towards North Korea – one that considers when engagement or enforcement is necessary – will be the most effective approach to address the North Korean nuclear issue.[16] The recent trilateral meeting between the US, South Korea and Japan may present the opportunity needed to establish this balanced approach through coordination with other important regional actors.

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[1] "S. Korea, U.S., Japan warn N. Korea over nuclear test, urge 'different path'," *Yonhap News*, May 21, 2012, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/fullstory/2012/05/21/59/4500000000AEN20120521004300315F.HTML>.

[2] Glyn Davies, U.S. special representative for North Korean policy, "Remarks to Press at Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade," May 21, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2012/05/190450.htm>.

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[3] "S. Korea, U.S., Japan warn N. Korea over nuclear test, urge 'different path'." For full source citation see reference 1 above.

[4] Charles L. Pritchard, *Failed Diplomacy: The Tragic Story of How North Korea Got the Bomb* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2007), p. 96.

[5] James L. Schoff, *Tools for Trilateralism: Improving U.S.-Japan-Korea Cooperation to Manage Complex Contingencies* (Dulles: Potomac Books, 2005), pp. 29-30.

[6] See Victor D. Cha, *Alignment Despite Antagonism: the United States-Korea-Japan Security Triangle* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Ralph A. Cossa ed., *U.S.-Korea-Japan Relations: Building Toward a "Virtual Alliance"* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1999); Tae-hyo Kim and Brad Glosserman eds., *The Future of U.S.-Korea-Japan Relations: Balancing Values and Interests* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2004).

[7] Schoff, *Tools for Trilateralism*, p. 9. See also William J. Perry, U.S. North Korean policy coordinator and special advisor to the president and the secretary of state, "Review of United States Policy toward North Korea: Findings and Recommendations," October 12, 1999, http://www.state.gov/www/regions/eap/991012_northkorea_rpt.html.

[8] Schoff, *Tools for Trilateralism*, pp. 25-28; Pritchard, *Failed Diplomacy*, p. 179.

[9] See Gilbert Rozman and Shin-wha Lee, "Unraveling the Japan-South Korea 'Virtual Alliance': Populism and Historical Revisionism in the Face of Conflicting Regional Strategies," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 46, No. 5 (October 2006), pp. 761-784.

[10] International Crisis Group, "North Korea: The Risks of War in the Yellow Sea," *Asia Report*, No. 198 (23 December 2010), pp. 35-36.

[11] *Ibid*, p. 35.

[12] Toru Higashioka and Akihiko Kaise, "Japan, U.S., South Korea will ask China to rein in N. Korea," *Asahi Shimbun*, May 22, 2010, http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/politics/AJ201205220074.

[13] Toru Higashioka and Kim Soonhi, "Trilateral joint declaration omits all references to North Korea," *Asahi Shimbun*, May 15, 2012, http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/politics/AJ201205150040.

[14] Pritchard, *Failed Diplomacy*, pp. 52-54.

[15] Davies, "Remarks to Press at Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade." For full source citation see reference 2.

[16] Leif-Eric Easley, "Building trust or giving it away? The Roh administration's engagement of the North," *PacNet*, No. 32A (24 July 2006).