



Day 2 Session V: The Virtual Alliance

Moderator: Walter Lohman, The Heritage Foundation

Speakers: Michael Auslin, American Enterprise Institute
Bong Youngshik, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies
Nishino Junya, Keio University

Moderator Walter Lohman began the session by pointing out how the session titled, “The Virtual Alliance,” somewhat encapsulates the current situation in which the alliance among the United States, Japan and Korea, cannot be spoken of as a whole and Japan is often the unspoken member. Questions were raised on the purpose of such an alliance—suggesting that it may be China that the three countries are allying over—and the strategic rationale in not only the short term—contingency on the Korean Peninsula—but also the long term.

First panelist Michael Auslin aimed at presenting the US perspective regarding the virtual alliance. His view towards the alliance is that it should not have been as difficult as it is turning out to be today given that Korea and Japan are allies that closely mirror each other in many aspects. He voiced that the alliance could have been celebrated for the fruitful dynamics of the members, which is currently not the reality. He commented that there is room for improvement as to what Washington can do on this issue, although acknowledging the regular trilateral discussions currently in place, which, despite coming across as vague, meant that there is such a mechanism and an understanding that Washington should do better. Regarding the purpose, he noted that the trilateral alliance from the US perspective is about the future of Asia and it is most natural that the two leading liberal nations in East Asia such as Korea and Japan should serve as the drivers for building future peace, prosperity, stability and liberal norms in the region. When such an alliance could have been in place 15 or 20 years ago, what really has happened is that now that China is catching up, the United States is trying to figure out the alliance structure and fit it into ASEAN and the East Asia summit, which is a waste of time. He suggested that Washington should have a serious heart-to-heart discussion with both countries as to where the relationship should go for deeper trust-rooted cooperation, though admitting this is not a solve-all. Also, he concluded that if the United States were to continue investing to build leverage with the two countries over the next 60 years for achieving greater goals, he is less optimistic as he does not see this initiative taking place.

When questioned by the moderator as to what the alliance is about beyond the Korean Peninsula and why it is needed in addressing China, Auslin stated that there is more to the alliance than just China, such as jointly promoting democracy and liberal society as best practices, which Korea has a more recent experience with than Japan. On the economic side, he suggested maritime-oriented trade and TPP as issues that can be worked on with the trilateral alliance.

Second panelist Bong Youngshik cautioned that the bilateral alliance between South Korea and the United States is taken for granted to some extent, and if we were to regard it as a prelude to a higher level of regional security architecture, this may not be easily achieved although there is emerging consensus among Korean observers that the alliance can achieve

more than the prevention of war. He posed a pessimistic view as to whether the US-ROK alliance can be upgraded into a virtual alliance with Japan. First, he pointed out that from a realistic viewpoint, a country cannot rely on another country's security commitment. Quoting a book by J. J. Suh, *Bound to Last*—"in the history of modern international politics, only five percent of all kinds of security alliance last more than five years,"—he mentioned that it is the norm that such commitments are terminated, and the longevity of the US-ROK alliance is a rare case. Also, he pointed out that only 10 years ago, such a celebration was a taboo due to anti-American sentiments in Korea, and we will never know what can happen in the time span of the next decade.

After noting that the supply side—the technical feasibility—and the demand side—desirability—should be observed, he presented optimistic findings on the latter by citing Korean public survey results. According to the survey, 67.6 percent of respondents named the United States as a desirable leader whereas 26.4 percent chose China, and 65.9 percent of respondents replied that China was not a desirable leader. In regards to Korea's partner country, 85.5 percent chose the United States. When asked about the ROK-China relationship, around 11 percent agreed it was good, around 17 percent found it bad, and 71 percent replied it depended on issues and circumstances. Additionally, it was found that Korean citizens found the EU as a possible partner for forging a value-based partnership rather than China. With respect to the possibility of expanding the scope of the bilateral US-ROK relationship, the increasing and diverse challenges posed by North Korea will help South Korea expand the scope of its missions. Yet, he made a less optimistic conclusion than the previous speaker that the future of the US-ROK alliance will have enough potential to become a stepping-stone to a multilateral security institution in Northeast Asia such as NATO, and there should be more tangible evidence to back this rationale.

When questioned by the moderator about the kind of alliance he pictured when involving China, he responded that China is becoming a welcoming and persistent voice in the multilateral security dialogue.

Last panelist Nishino Junya commented that among the bilateral alliances constituting the virtual alliance, the ROK-Japan relationship is the weakest link and analyzed the involved factors: North Korea, China, and the effort of both countries to improve the relationship.

Regarding the first factor, North Korea has been a driving force behind the relationship between the three countries since the Korean War. A security treaty between the United States and Japan agreed that Japan supported the operation of US forces on the Korean Peninsula, and the US forces stationed in Okinawa played a critical role in dealing with North Korea threats. After the Cold War, North Korean provocations were the highest priority in Japanese security policy, thus leading to security cooperation. But there have been recent difficulties between Korea and Japan, such as the stemmed Intelligence Sharing Agreement in 2011 due to critical public opinion in South Korea. There is also a growing perception gap in dealing with North Korea. There is a growing perception in South Korea of viewing North Korea as the same ethnicity, whereas Japanese citizens have expressed strong anger regarding the abductee issue.

The two countries are also experiencing differences in how they address China. Japan is pursuing beefed up security capacity in its southern part of Japan in response to expansion of Chinese military. It is also trying to strengthen security cooperation with other democracies.

The Abe administration intends to strengthen the alliance with the United States, enter the TPP negotiation, and make most out of the US rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific in its security agenda. Korean President Park Geun-hye is pursuing proactive relationship building with China with the recognition that cooperation with China can help deal with the North Korean issues. For Korea, China is not only an important trade partner, but also a major stakeholder in the future of the Korean Peninsula. Also, China is a signatory of the armistice agreement of 1953. Given these facts, it would be difficult for President Park to seek improved relations with China without easing the tension between China and Japan and one of the ways to do this is reducing trilateral cooperation.

As for the improvement of the ROK-Japan bilateral relationship, the speaker expressed that historic matters should be discussed in a cautious manner. The recent trend shows that on the civil level, there are growing exchanges and mutual understanding between the two Koreas, but this is not the case on the political level. The speaker noted that Japanese leaders should understand that Korean leaders, particularly President Park, must endure a great deal politically due to the historic memory of South Koreans, and suggested that it seems that Prime Minister Abe has now recognized the sensitivity of the comfort women issue after the harsh criticism against inappropriate statements, but recently the administration supported those statements. He suggested that the South Korean government notes these in mind when approaching the Japanese party when having a summit meeting as soon as possible.

When asked about the role that the United States can play at a time when the Japan-Korea relationship may as of today be experiencing a downward spiral with the changing circumstances, Auslin expressed his agreement with the notion of a downward spiral, and that what the United States can do is to be honest and suggest that Korea and China discuss the options they have without the United States. Bong noted that there is a tendency that Asian allies of the United States can afford not to upgrade their bilateral relationship because they have to consider the opportunity cost: budget size, allocation, security priority and comparison of Japan and China as partners. Also, such an upgrade is associated with merging national identity with the partner country, and with the memory of Japan's colonial rule of Korea deeply embedded in Korea, Bong was somewhat pessimistic. He later raised the question of US partial involvement in resolving the Dokdo issue.

When questioned whether track 1.5 dialogue can help, Nishino expressed that encouraging trilateral dialogue is very important, but they should be cautious because it could be a negative signal to China, and the US-China relationship is important in this respect. Regarding the misunderstanding that the driving force of Japanese security is a nationalistic issue, he voiced that although Prime Minister Abe has a conservative mindset, the ordinary citizens are willing to contribute to the international community. Additionally, Abe mentioned historic issues negatively in April, but within one month he had to amend it, which shows the balance in Japan. Auslin added that track 1.5 works under the conditions that: 1) there is a very committed relationship already in place, and 2) the agenda is something that the governments are already committed to.

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