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China's Position on Increasing Military Cooperation between North Korea and Russia

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With the North Korea-Russia summit in September 2023 and increasing North Korea-Russia military ties, concerns have been raised over a potential triangular axis between North Korea, China, and Russia that could lead to a confrontational structure of 'ROK-U.S.-Japan versus North Korea-China-Russia' in Northeast Asia. However, China has maintained a distance from North Korea-Russia military ties and the triangular axis, illustrating that the North Korea-Russia relationship remains exclusive. What makes China display such a cautious position toward the potential coalition between the three countries?

1. China's participation in the triangular axis contradicts its criticism of U.S. alliances and “Cold War mentality”

China has criticized the U.S.' alliance diplomacy as Cold War thinking and has established partnerships with other countries to differentiate itself from the United States. China especially denounced the ROK-U.S.-Japan Summit in August 2023, stating “attempts to cobble together various exclusionary groupings and bring bloc confrontation and military blocs into the Asia-Pacific are not going to get support and will only be met with vigilance and opposition from regional countries.”¹ In that sense, China's participation in a triangular axis with North Korea and Russia can be perceived as exhibiting the same U.S.-like behaviors China has criticized.

2. The formation of the triangular axis can accelerate security cooperation between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan and intensify pressure on China in the region

China criticized the strengthening security cooperation between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan as a military alliance. It also expressed doubts about the sustainability of trilateral security cooperation by pointing out that the improvement in ROK-Japan relations is based on pressure from the U.S. Given these objections, China seems to worry that it could be the target of this trilateral security cooperation instead of North Korea. Closer North Korea-Russia military ties and North Korea's launch of a military spy satellite strengthened the trilateral security cooperation. In this situation, if China joins a triangular axis with North Korea and Russia, it will further strengthen cooperation between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan. It could also cause this trilateral security cooperation to target China and intensify pressure on China in the region.

3. The triangular axis can worsen the recently improved relations between the U.S. and China

At the U.S.-China summit held on November 15, both countries agreed to resume military talks based on the consensus that they should “manage competition responsibly to prevent it from veering into conflict, confrontation, or a new Cold War.”² Through this, China tried to avoid direct confrontation with the U.S. while resisting U.S. pressure and containment. If China joins forces with North Korea and Russia, it is likely to collide with the U.S. due to the behaviors of North Korea and Russia. Considering that the Chinese government needs to prioritize economic recovery and social stability for Xi's third term, it should avoid conflict escalation with the U.S. as much as possible.

4. The triangular axis can damage China's status in the international community and constrain China's international cooperation

Based on its economic power and various global initiatives, China has been enhancing its cooperative relationships with the Global South in multiple regions, including Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. In the process, China has consistently emphasized mutual respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference. If China participates in the triangular axis and provides military support to Russia or North Korea, such actions could be perceived as supporting Russia in the Ukraine War. This, in turn, will severely undermine the core principles of Chinese diplomacy and worsen relations with countries in Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Accordingly, this can limit Chinese international cooperation, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

5. China can face economic pressure due to sanctions from the international community

Despite abandoning the 'zero-COVID' policy and reopening its borders to recover and expand economic cooperation with other countries, China's economic situation is still precarious. The 'Peak China' theory has even been suggested, which argues that China's rise has already reached its zenith and is on a downwards trajectory due to population decline, Western countries' containment, a real estate crisis, and concerns related to Xi Jinping's one-man rule. Given China's determination to seek economic growth, participating in the triangular axis could trigger a secondary boycott by the U.S. and Western countries. Since this would severely damage the Chinese economy, it is difficult for China to take an active role in the triangular axis.

Policy Implications

Given China's position, it is unlikely to actively encourage the formation of a triangular axis between North Korea, China, and Russia. In that sense, the South Korean government should send the Chinese government a clear message that South Korea understands China's position and that North Korea-Russia military ties can negatively impact regional stability. As such, South Korea should reestablish high-level diplomatic channels with China.

South Korea also needs to revitalize discussions on economic cooperation and supply chain stabilization with China. As recent ROK-U.S.-Japan security agreements expanded to include supply chain cooperation, the Chinese government may perceive that this is targeting them and intensify cooperation with North Korea and Russia. To avert this, South Korea should emphasize that the trilateral security cooperation between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan is not targeted at a specific country, but rather enhances global supply chain stability through the framework of 'economic security.' Also, as 'decoupling' has shifted to 'de-risking,' South Korea should highlight the economic interdependence between South Korea and China and revitalize discussions with Beijing on economic cooperation and supply chain stabilization. These endeavors may reveal that China takes a different position from that of North Korea and Russia and prevent the formation of a triangular axis between North Korea, China, and Russia that would herald a new Cold War structure in the region.

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(‘북러 군사밀착과 중국: 북중러 3각 연대로 나아가는가?’, <https://www.asaninst.org/?p=91833>)

¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s Regular Press Conference on August 18, 2023”, 2023.08.18.,

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202308/t20230818_11128863.html/.

² The White House, “Readout of President Joe Biden’s Meeting with President Xi Jinping of the People’s Republic of China”, 2023.11.15., <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/11/15/readout-of-president-joe-bidens-meeting-with-president-xi-jinping-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china-2/>.



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