

China and the ROK-US-Japan "Virtual Alliance"

Panel: Session I (Orchid Room)
Date/Time: December 11, 2012 / 12:45-14:00
Speakers: Han Sukhee, Yonsei University (Moderator)
Dai Changzheng, University of International Business and Economics
Nishino Junya, Keio University
Gilbert Rozman, Princeton University
Shin Bong-kil, Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat
Rapporteur: J. James Kim, Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Panel Short Summary

Han Sukhee raised the following set of questions related to the US-ROK-Japan Alliance. How does China view the US-ROK-Japan alliance and the intentions of its parties?

Dai Changzheng began by identifying the key issues related to the alliance in the region—namely, maritime passage in the South China Sea, nuclear issues, and territorial disputes. According to Dai, the solution to these problems lies in the establishment of a common understanding about the importance of cooperation, trust, and perceptions of each party's interests. The approach towards the alliance should recognize the uniqueness of each nation's rules and responsibilities as well as emphasize mutual cooperation in place of strategic balancing. The goals should be geared towards peace and stability, economic trade and cooperation, and mutual interaction.

Nishino Junya began by expressing the duality in ROK-Japan relations by mentioning the historical backdrop of President Lee Myungbak's visit to Dokdo Island on August 10th, the 2009 Memorandum on the Joint Defense Exchange, and the 2010 US-ROK-Japan military exercise. However, Japan remains interested in strengthening security cooperation with South Korea. The ruling party, for instance, has been unequivocal in its support for the security alliance with South Korea. Given the North Korean threat and the Chinese defense build up, a Japan-ROK alliance would be a critical component for regional peace and stability. Finally, the budget constraints of the US government implies lessened US

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involvement in the region. In moving forward, both Japan and South Korea must recognize the inflammatory nature of historical issues and avoid politicization of these issues. Secondly, Japan and South Korea must make effort to share a common vision for the region's future. Finally, Japan and South Korea must work closely with Washington while keeping their national interest in perspective.

Gilbert Rozman warns of a downward spiral and decline of trust. Dai Changzheng's emphasis on the recognition of core national interest and collaboration rather than balancing is precisely the kind of prescription for cold war, rather than regional peace and stability. The danger is to replace emphasis on multilateralism with a focus on self-interest. The problem lies in the fact that the United States and China do not see eye-to-eye on North Korea, Japan-ROK relations, and maritime issues. Domestic political conditions are also of concern in that if Moon and Abe emerge as winners in the coming election, Japan-ROK relations will come under serious duress. Most importantly, prospects for collaboration between Japan and South Korea will be lowered as a result of deteriorating public mood and support.

Shin Bongil pointed to two triangular ties among the four nations in question—the ROK-Japan virtual alliance and the PRC-ROK-Japan regional cooperative framework. The latter is built on regular meetings at the summit, cabinet, and advisory levels. Shin sees South Korea as a key player in both alliance frameworks as a member of the 20/50 Club and he expects South Korea to take the initiative in the coming trilateral summit.

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