

Smart Talk No. 26

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This product presents a policy-oriented summary of the Smart Talk.

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A South Korean-Japanese Strategic Partnership: An Emerging Reality, or an American Fantasy?

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On June 14, 2012, the East Asia Institute invited Dr. Mark E. Manyin (Congressional Research Service) to discuss on South Korea-Japan relations and the potential for a strategic partnership. The following are some of the main points of the presentation and subsequent discussion with South Korean experts and scholars.

Summary of the Seminar

Enhancing South Korea-Japan relations has been in the interests of both countries and importantly, the United States. Dr. Manyin outlined two main sets of variables that have positive and negative effects on cooperation. Among the various forces that compel cooperation, there are five main factors that stand out.

The first is the threat posed by North Korea which acts as a main driver for South Korea and Japan to strengthen relations. The second factor is the changing power relationship between the two sides which also brings the two countries together. South Korea's strong economic growth has put pressure on Japan, which has been suffering from negative growth. It is not that Japan fears South Korea but rather it has now come to view the relationship on a more equal basis. Third, China's rise has led to greater China-Japan-South Korea cooperation resulting in discussions on a Trilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA). At the same time, the perception of China's rise as a *threat leads many to consider a strengthened*

South Korea-Japan relationship as a way to deal with China. Fourth, the United States, as the main ally of both countries, has an influence on the two countries seeking to work closer together. Finally, societal changes have resulted in greater people-to-people contact and less negative perceptions emerging, particularly among the younger generation in Japan toward Korea. However, it is unclear to what extent this will affect governmental behavior, particularly on the Korean side.

On the other hand, there are also a set of variables that resist cooperation. The first factor is the irresolvable bilateral issues of the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute, the Japanese history textbook controversies, and the comfort women issue. These issues continue to persist due to domestic politics and if not resolved soon will even possibly become a permanent feature of the bilateral relationship.

Second, the potential for backlash from opposition groups in both countries impedes cooperation. Both governments have been reluctant to take on such opposition groups who tend to be small in numbers but strong in voice and influence. Third, there is a noticeable gap in the way the two countries perceive China. While Japan is similar to the United States in viewing China as a potential threat, South Korea views cooperation with China as essential for the eventual reunification of the Korean Peninsula.

Finally, there is still a deep feeling of mistrust between the two governments that has proven difficult to overcome. In spite of this

continued mistrust, the two governments have attempted to enhance the bilateral relationship, particularly through security cooperation. The attempt to sign two agreements, the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) and the General Security of Military Information Agreements (GSOMIA), are both examples of attempts to improve relations while also revealing the domestic difficulties in making this a reality.

In this regard, Dr. Manyin offered his insights on the future challenges for ROK-Japan relations. For the immediate term, the signing of GSOMIA and resolving the comfort women issue will go some way toward shaping the future course of the bilateral relationship. A significant challenge though is that Japan has become less important to South Korea and therefore its policy toward Japan has become more derivative. Ultimately, the South Korean government's approach to North Korea and China will determine whether it will be willing to prevent historical and territorial disputes from spilling over into other areas of its relationship with Japan.

In Japan, there is a good possibility that the Prime Minister will be forced to call an early election. Whether he is replaced by another prime minister from the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) or a coalition government is able to form, it is expected that the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) will come back in the near future. The question is whether an LDP or populist leader will exploit territorial issues or make a strategic decision to distinguish Dokdo/Takeshima from other territorial issues. The fear for Tokyo though is that reaching a compromise on Dokdo might jeopardize its claims to the Kuril/Northern Islands.

For the long term, Dr. Manyin expected that relations will be brought closer through increased trade, frequent educational exchange,

and regular military exercises. Still, the territorial and historical issues will continue to place a limit on the pace of cooperation.

During the discussion, one of the discussants pointed out that the U.S. and its alliance with the two countries should be considered as a variable that actually undermines cooperation. This is because there is no compelling strategic need for either Japan or South Korea to strengthen military cooperation between them so long as their respective security needs are guaranteed by the United States.

In addressing a question posed by one discussant on the role that the United States plays in mitigating conflict between its alliance partners, Dr. Manyin stated that Washington generally kept both sides equally in check and would intervene if either one went over the limit on any bilateral issue. He also believed it was crucial that the United States plays an active role due to the lack of a hotline between South Korea and Japan.

In general, the United States would favor cooperation between the two sides as it would make the current intelligence sharing efforts on the North Korean threat more efficient. Closer cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo would also send a message to Beijing that countries are trending against it. As Japan looks for new partners in face of China's rise, the Japanese leadership will have to consider making South Korea a priority. ■

About the Speaker

Mark E. Manyin

Mark E. Manyin is a specialist in Asian Affairs at the Congressional Research Service (CRS), a non-partisan agency that provides information and analysis to members of the U.S. Congress and their staff. At CRS, Dr. Manyin's general area of expertise is U.S. foreign economic policy toward East Asia, particularly Japan, the two Koreas, and Vietnam. From 2006 to 2008, he served as the head of the CRS' 11-person Asia Section, overseeing the Service's research on East, Southeast, and South Asia as well as Australasia and the Pacific Islands. Prior to joining CRS in 1999, Dr. Manyin completed his PhD in Japanese trade policy and negotiating behavior at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. He is a former CFR term member.

Moderator

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Discussants

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