

Smart Q&A

The Changing Security Environment in East Asia and South Korea's Diplomatic Strategy

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Summary

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to the U.S. in late April and the Victory Day celebration in Russia in early May had the South Korean media asking whether a new U.S.-Japan and Sino-Russian "honeymoon period" has begun, raising concerns over Korea being stuck in between. Meanwhile, the fact that Chinese President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Abe have expressed mutual willingness to improve relations between China and Japan during the Bandung Conference in April suggests that these types of concerns cannot simply be restricted to the traditional rivalry between U.S.-Japan and China. To understand the implications of such dynamic diplomacy among the powerful nations surrounding the Korean peninsula, EAI invited three South Korean experts for a brief Smart Q&A discussion. Starting from a general assessment of the current security environment in East Asia, participants sought a desirable strategy for South Korea's diplomatic and security interests. This conversation was held on May 16th, prior to the announcement of the delay of the U.S.-South Korea Summit.

The Security Landscape in East Asia: Assessment and Outlook

"The U.S. and China both realize the need for cooperation, but from an international relations perspective, it is hard to foresee anything but competition and conflict between the two great powers."

A Stronger U.S.-Japan Alliance: Diplomatic and Security Strategies for South Korea

"In terms of security, efforts to restore cooperative relations with Japan, to a certain degree, are necessary within the context of ROK-U.S.-Japan policy coordination."

"With the goal of unification in mind, South Korea must also maintain strategic, cooperative relations with China."

A Desirable Path towards the ROK-U.S. Summit

"It is important for South Korea to adopt a more proactive diplomacy vis-a-vis the U.S. that can relay its vision for the ROK-U.S. alliance and its strategy towards East Asia. The current government's key ideas such as *trustpolitik*, Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI), and the Eurasia Initiative should reflect the changing international environment by being recalibrated in a more detailed manner."

The Changing Security Environment in East Asia and South Korea's Diplomatic Strategy

Chaesung Chun: Recently, diplomacy between the four major powers surrounding the Korean Peninsula has become considerably more dynamic. The U.S.-Japan summit during Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to Washington in April, the China-Russia summit during Chinese President Xi Jinping's May attendance at the Victory Day celebration in Russia, and the China-Japan summit in April during the Bandung conference in Indonesia are all contributing to the rapid change and development in the relationships between these countries. Accordingly, Korea is going to have to establish a position in East Asia, and with the U.S.-ROK summit approaching, we have prepared a venue for a group of experts to discuss what policy direction South Korea should pursue. On that note, let us start with a general evaluation of the security situation in East Asia.

The Security Landscape in East Asia: Assessment and Outlook

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"The U.S. and China both realize the need for cooperation, but from an international relations perspective, it is hard to foresee anything but competition and conflict between the two great powers."

Young-jun Park: The structure and characteristics of East Asia's security order is determined by conflict and cooperation between China and the U.S., China-Japan relations, and the U.S.-Japan alliance versus Sino-Russian military cooperation. First, thanks to the opportunity provided by the APEC summit in November of 2014 for a meeting between the presidents of both countries, a certain level of stability has developed in U.S.-China relations. If viewed from a wide lens, the U.S.-Japan alliance appears to have been strengthened by the visit of Prime Minister Abe to the U.S. and the China-Russia relationship has also strengthened following the joint naval exercises by the two countries in the Mediterranean Sea and Chinese President Xi Jinping's attendance of Russia's 70th Victory Day celebration.

But if viewed closely, it can be seen that the two groups are not exclusively in conflict or cooperation; rather they are currently showing signs of existing in a state where both cooperation and conflict co-exist. The competitive aspects of the relationship between the two groups can be found in rising military expenditures of all parties or having the U.S.-Japan alliance reaffirm the Senkaku Island issue. At the same time, the increase of mutual cooperation can be seen if we consider continued talks between the U.S. and China on military and security issues, China's participation in the U.S. hosted Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC), and the adoption of the Prevention of Collision at Sea Act by Japan, the U.S., and China at the Western Pacific Naval Symposium in Qingdao, China. The co-existence of competition and cooperation between these major powers suggests that all parties recognize the need to maintain and manage their relations in order to avoid unnecessary escalation.

Dong Ryul Lee: The standoff between U.S.-Japan and China-Russia may seem as if the Cold War era has returned, but it is impossible to define the latter relationship as a simple alliance or a competitive relationship. It is true that President Xi Jinping's visit to Russia during the 70th anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany served to show that the close

China-Russia relationship is based on opposition to the U.S., but it does not seem that both countries prefer worsening their relations with the U.S. Even though the China-Japan relationship is centered around historical and territorial problems, it is possible to envision the possibility of relaxed tensions following China's search for an exit strategy from the territorial sovereignty dispute in the East China Sea during the APEC summit last year. When we consider China's worries over how the U.S. gains a more advantageous strategic position if there is conflict between Japan and China, we can expect China to seek to improve relations with both Japan and the U.S.

Chun: The influence of the U.S.-China relationship on security in East Asia is immense. The unipolar system centered around the U.S. that has remained in place since the end of the cold war is changing. That is, with China's quick rise and the closing power gap between the two great nations, a power transition appears likely. In that sense, I believe today's East Asian diplomatic environment is defined by how the surrounding countries express their diverse interests as the relationship between the two great powers evolves.

Right now, the U.S. and China both realize the need for cooperation. But from an international relations perspective, it is hard to foresee anything but competition and conflict between the two great powers. When considering the security dilemma principle, which is a way of explaining the deepening of competition due to uncertainty, current U.S.-China Relations can be seen as a kind of prelude to a structure of conflict that will develop between the two states in the future. But the current U.S.-China relationship is different than it was during the Cold War. On the one hand the U.S. and China are engaged in an intense traditional military competition, but they are also competing fiercely to have the international norms and systems reflect their own interests in the fields of economics and finance, as well as new emerging issues such as the environment. It is here that South Korea, Russia, and Japan have joined in the diplomatic war. The time of full-scale conflict between the U.S. and China could arrive around 2020. Therefore, we can say that the current situation is one defined by avoidance of conflict through interdependence.

A Stronger U.S.-Japan Alliance: Diplomatic and Security Strategies for South Korea

“In terms of security, efforts to restore cooperative relations with Japan, to a certain degree, are necessary within the context of ROK-U.S.-Japan policy coordination.”

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Chun: Within the context of the complicated ROK-Japan relationship, a revision of the Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation, or, in other words, Prime Minister Abe's push to make Japan a “normal country” and the corresponding various strategies that come along with such a move are a growing concern in South Korea. How can the direction of development of the U.S.-ROK alliance be harmonized with the trend of a strengthening U.S.-Japan alliance?

Park: The recent U.S.-Japan summit and the revision of the Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation have an important significance in many ways. The Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation is the document that established both countries' strategic orientation with the first agreement coming in 1978 and a revision being made to the document in 1997. The first draft of the guidelines written in 1978 in the midst of the Cold War mainly dealt with the U.S.-Japan countermeasures in the case of an attack by the Soviet Union, and the second draft released in 1997 mostly outlined a response in the case of a conflict breaking out on the Korean Peninsula. The Japanese requested the guidelines be revised again and the latest version mostly deals with how the U.S.-Japan alliance can contain the rise of China.

When we consider that China is not simply a target for containment to the U.S., but also a country that should be cooperated with, the third and most recent draft of the Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation should be understood as a product of a balancing act between the American position which seeks to both contain and engage China at the same time and the Japanese position which takes the containment of China more seriously. In fact, the revised guidelines do not specify how the U.S.-Japan alliance will contain China, while the statement of the U.S.-Japan 2+2 Security Consultative Committee choose to express the containment of China through declaring that the Senkaku Islands are within the scope of the U.S.-Japan alliance. If viewed from both perspectives, Japan was able to strengthen the containment of China on the level of the U.S.-Japan alliance, and the U.S. can say that its interests were reflected in the 2015 revision of the guidelines since there is no direct expression stating that it is containing China.

With China not overly opposing the revision to the Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation, South Korea seems to have secured a wider strategic space. Given this opportunity, South Korea could seek to establish a stronger stance against North Korea's nuclear weapons development program through the U.S.-Japan alliance as well as through cooperation with China. Also, at least in terms of security, with the U.S.-Japan relationship strengthening, efforts to restore relations with Japan, to a certain degree, are a prerequisite for cooperative policies between South Korea, the U.S. and Japan.

Lee: China is not reacting too sensitively to the strengthening of the already existing U.S.-Japan alliance, but it is strongly opposed to the participation of new countries such as South Korea, Australia, India, Indonesia, etc. in this relationship. This could also be a very important opportunity for South Korea to improve its status and establish a new strategy as a middle power, and ongoing U.S.-China relations should be considered while devising the South Korean strategy towards East Asia. In this context, the division of the Korean peninsula will require careful management since it can easily become a stage for great power politics.

The primary reason for the close relationship between China and Russia is their mutual interest in opposing the U.S. China also feels it is important to procure Russian cooperation in order to advance its "One Belt One Road" initiative. However, this does not mean that China and Russia want their relationship with the U.S. to deteriorate, and therefore it is hard to imagine that both countries are focusing solely on drawing closer together. Meanwhile, the relationship between China and Japan is showing signs of improvement at the working level despite the sharp standoff over history issues; given that China is seeking an exit strategy over the territorial disputes that fall under its core interest, it is hard to consider historical arguments as a decisive factor for its foreign policy. In fact, it is possible for China and Japan to improve their relationship quickly despite the appearance of tensions and conflict. Subsequently, this can be an important challenge for South Korean diplomacy.

Chun: Following the economic crisis in 2008, the U.S. has come up with the rebalance to Asia strategy as a way to recover its weakening global leadership. This strategy is seen as a way for the U.S. to revive its supremacy vis-à-vis a rising China and in the world by strengthening its ability to control and manage global affairs. In order to do this, the U.S. is strengthening its strategic partnerships with its allies and nonaligned nations, and developing mini-lateral and multilateral ties. Here, the U.S. needs a strong ally that can provide actual economic and military support, and Japan is considered as the ideal partner with such capabilities. Japan's strategy of becoming a "normal country" and its willingness to expand its military role in East Asia matches well with the U.S. rebalance strategy in the midst of regional power transition in Northeast Asia. Strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance would necessitate an increased military role by Japan, and a special point of interest would be on how the two countries will cooperate over the South China Sea issue against China.

For South Korea, it will be crucial to see to what extent its strategy towards China can align with that of the U.S.-Japan alliance. With the goal of unification in mind, South Korea must also maintain strategic, cooperative relations with China. Give this, it would be undesirable for South Korea to see any excessive conflict arising between China and the U.S.-Japan alliance. Therefore, the ideal situation for South Korea would be to engage in strategic cooperation with China given that the relationship between China, Japan, and the U.S. has adjusted itself to a place where there is no extreme conflict. It is also a given that South Korea should exert diplomatic efforts into sufficiently explaining its position to the U.S. and Japan.

A Desirable Path for the ROK-U.S. Summit

"Because we have already thoroughly expressed our concerns regarding historical problems with Japan to the U.S., constantly repeating ourselves may have an adverse effect ... With regard to North Korea's nuclear program, South Korea and the U.S. should reaffirm the principle of denuclearization and continue to press on specific measures."

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"Instead of competing with Japan in Washington, there needs to be a longer term effort to garner cooperation between Japan, South Korea, and the U.S. in dealing with issues in East Asia."

Chun: Considering Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's recent summit in the U.S. and Chinese President Xi Jinping's upcoming visit to the U.S. in September, it feels like South Korea must conduct its visit in the midst of a competitive landscape. Let's discuss the diplomatic efforts and results that we can expect for South Korean President Park Geun-hye to pursue during her trip to the United States.

Park: Currently, given that both President Park and President Obama are in the middle of their respective terms as president, it is not only time for both countries to conduct a progress report on their foreign policies, but it is also good

time to strengthen cooperation between the U.S. and South Korea. Especially considering the U.S.-Japan agreement on the U.S. Asia rebalance strategy, South Korea should clearly signal its intention to expand and strengthen cooperation with the U.S. in regards to the rise of China and East Asian security. However, because we have already thoroughly expressed our concerns regarding historical problems with Japan to the U.S., constantly repeating ourselves may have an adverse effect. And with regard to North Korea's nuclear program, South Korea and the U.S. should reaffirm the principle of denuclearization and continue to press on specific measures.

Finally, South Korea must alleviate Washington's suspicions over its position with respect to U.S.-China relations. Within both countries' foreign policies, there are differences in some specific areas such as Korea's decision to participate in the AIIB, but Korea must remind the U.S. that overall both countries are on the same page. Also, both countries should recognize that the rise of China in East Asia is not necessarily a cause for apprehension but a potentially contributing factor to peace in the region. In order to do so, South Korea should emphasize the importance of consultation within the ROK-U.S. or ROK-U.S.-Japan framework.

Lee: Visiting the U.S. in between visits by the leaders of both Japan and China will not be an easy task for President Park. This is drawing even more attention to an already important situation. Especially given that this year is the 70th anniversary of Korea's independence, one would hope that this summit could live up to that level of significance and become an opportunity in which both countries can develop a new and future-oriented relationship.

If we look at the current situation in East Asia, we can say that the Korean Peninsula is a reflection of cooperation and tension between the surrounding major powers through what I view as outsourced diplomacy. South Korea must find a way to minimize this phenomenon and recognize that its status and role as a middle power are important at this time. In that sense, the summit should not simply focus on ROK-U.S. relations but needs to address various stakeholders in Northeast Asia. It should also be a venue where South Korea can provide a more detailed and refined vision towards unification as well as the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI). In doing so, South Korea must be able to win U.S. understanding and support of its status and role in East Asia.

Chun: It is important for South Korea to adopt a more proactive diplomacy vis-a-vis the U.S. that can relay its vision for the ROK-U.S. alliance and its strategy towards East Asia. Today, the defining characteristic of the U.S.-China relations is the uncertainty about the future. Given this, South Korea needs to strive to guarantee peace and stability in East Asia while at the same time maximize its national interests. Accordingly, South Korea should understand the nature of conflict and cooperation between the U.S. before defining its role in East Asia. The current government's key ideas such as *trustpolitik*, Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI), and the Eurasia Initiative should reflect the changing international environment by being recalibrated in a more detailed manner.

Also, with the Park Geun-hye administration being in the middle of its term of office, this should be a time for a review of South Korea's East Asian strategy. The U.S. is currently struggling to propose a bright vision for the future of East Asia. The reason the U.S.-China summit is attracting so much attention is that many are expecting a new vision for the future. Here, if South Korea plays a leadership role, we may see more positive results than previously expected. If that is to be the case, there must be significant preparation of the arguments and principles to be presented during the ROK-U.S. summit by the South Korean delegation.

The U.S. will be expecting to hear about how South Korea views the order in East Asia and the diplomacy it plans to pursue. Here, it is important for the U.S. and South Korea to strengthen their partnership and understand each oth-

er's position on various pending issues, including China's role in the Korean Peninsula. Instead of competing with Japan in Washington, there also needs to be a longer term effort to garner ROK-U.S.-Japan cooperation in dealing with issues in East Asia. ■

About the Discussants

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