

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

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**The Future of U.S. Alliances and Partnerships in Asia:
Implications for the U.S.-ROK Alliance**

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On May 10, 2013, the East Asia Institute invited Abraham M. Denmark of National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) to discuss the future of the U.S. alliances in Asia and the implications for the Korean Peninsula. The following are some of the main points from the presentation and the subsequent discussion with experts and scholars.

Summary of the Seminar

The current status quo of the international system is defined by stability and powerful rule of law. This robust international system has provided many “public goods” – benefits a country enjoys freely from stability guaranteed by the strongly established international rule of law. The United States has played a dominant role in providing most of these public goods by establishing and implementing such international rule of law as free trade agreements, and open and stable global commons. However, this system dominated by the American power is changing, and the United States’ need to expand the role of its allies has become crucial in maintaining stability.

The coming strategic context of the international system is becoming more complex than it was in the past. According to Denmark, countries in the Asian region now have stronger economic, political, and military capabilities, leading to a tremendous shift in the global geopolitics, rise of Asia, and emerging multipolarity in the region.

Thus, the United States now faces more complex strategic environment in the Asian region. While the U.S. allies are increasing

their economic, political, and military capabilities, the United States’ potential rivals in the Asian region are also improving their capabilities as well. For example, it is predicted that China will surpass the United States in the defense spending by 2030. In short, the United States’ dominant place and influence in the Asian region is slowly eroded by the increasing capabilities of both its allies and rivals in the region.

Denmark specifically pointed out three foreseeable challenges for the future of the U.S. alliances in Asia. First, managing China would be a difficult challenge, since the United States wants close economic relationship with China while maintaining strategic hegemonic edge over it. Denmark emphasized that the United States’ goal is not to contain or isolate China, but rather cooperate with China to create stronger regional multilateral cooperation in Asia.

Upon Denmark’s emphasis in cooperating with China to strengthen regional institutional multilateralism, one of the discussants raised doubt on the United States’ willingness to promote regional cooperation in Asia since the United States seems to be passive in promoting regional multilateralism. In response, Denmark stressed that the United States is supportive of the Asian regional cooperation, as can be seen in the facts that the United States was active in supporting and implementing the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

Second challenge to the future of the U.S. alliances in Asia is managing North Korea.

According to Denmark, in return for North Korea's recent acts of belligerence and provocations, South Korea has placed more emphasis on its military capability in dealing with North Korea. This ultimately discounts the importance of other elements of South Korea's national power vis-à-vis North Korea, such as South Korea's diplomatic weight and economic heft. In this crucial moment in the U.S.-South Korea alliance when the transfer of wartime operational control is being discussed, it is important that South Korea takes more initiative in playing a leading role in engaging North Korea with not only just military, but also diplomatic and economic approaches such as providing development aid and humanitarian assistance.

The last challenge that Denmark foresaw in the U.S. alliances in the Asian region is dealing with humanitarian assistance and disaster relief capabilities, especially in the Southeast Asian region. As the U.S. alliances and partnerships in Asia extend beyond simply military alliance, it is important for the U.S. allies in the region to cooperate in managing natural disasters such as tsunami, hurricane, and climate change.

In outlining the three challenges facing the future of the U.S. alliances in Asia, the future goal of the United States in overcoming such challenges is clear for Denmark: to expand the role of the U.S. allies in the region. This in itself is a complex and difficult task, as the U.S. allies want to benefit from China's economic rise while sustaining their own sovereignty and strategic autonomy against China.

The discussion concluded with a discussant's inquiry on Denmark's opinion on South Korean President Park Geun-hye's *trustpolitik*. According to Denmark, South Korea should build its trust with North Korea by starting with low-level issues, such as

humanitarian assistance. Once the foundation of the trust is built, South Korea should proceed on to more advanced series of issues, such as economic aid and nuclear non-proliferation. In doing so, South Korea should keep close communication with the United States and China. While engaging and building trust with North Korea is vital, Denmark expressed doubt about the overall concept of trust-building with North Korea. It is difficult to build trust with a country that has habitually been unable to comply with the international rule of law. However, Denmark concluded with a hopeful note that *trustpolitik* would be a broader strategy for South Korea to play more significant role as an U.S. ally in the region. ■

About the Speaker

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