

## SEJONG INSTITUTE – GWU ROUNDTABLE REPORT

On November 6, 2014 the Sejong Institute in South Korea and affiliated faculty of the Sigur Center for Asian Studies at the George Washington University held a roundtable discussion. Delegates from the Sejong Institute and Sigur Center faculty discussed a range of issues, from U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral relations in light of a rising China to Xi Jinping's leadership and its implications for Chinese foreign policy. Below is a summary of the many thoughtful and candid remarks exchanged during the roundtable. Consult the [Appendix](#) for the full roundtable agenda and list of participants.

### **Session A: China's Rise and U.S.-Japan-ROK Trilateral Cooperation**

China's rise and growing influence in Asia are inevitable. To illustrate this reality, one need only look at China-ROK relations. Before 1992 China and Korea had no formal relations. Today, China is Korea's largest trading partner. Furthermore, China is involved in almost every issue that faces Korea, from a nuclear North Korea to the regional economy. Along with China's rising influence, it has increasingly sought to assert itself militarily and economically in recent years as demonstrated by its actions in the South China Sea.

Given the inevitability of this rise, what should the U.S. and its allies do and what is the role of U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral security cooperation? One answer lies somewhere between confronting and accommodating China. China cannot be controlled. Still, the U.S. and its allies can help to shape China's choices and influence the direction of its decision-making so that its actions do not simply contribute to a re-shaping of the regional order in line with China's worldview. To accomplish this, a few important policy prescriptions must be followed.

First, the U.S. needs to play a more robust role in Asia; militarily, economically and politically. The U.S. "rebalance" to Asia announced by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2011 promised this type of increased U.S. presence. Unfortunately, much of this "rebalance" has not occurred under the Obama administration. Furthermore, if the U.S. is going to follow through on its "rebalance" to Asia then U.S.-ROK-Japan relations need to be the cornerstone of this policy. After all, it is America's alliances with the ROK and Japan that enable it to remain an important military and political force in the region.

So, trilateral security cooperation is essential. Unfortunately, cooperation among the three countries faces serious problems. One problem is the tensions between Korea and Japan. While Korea and Japan share a common set of values and interests, Korea also shares with China a history of suffering at the hands of Japanese colonialism and like China, has been caught up in territorial disputes with Japan. So, mistrust between Seoul and Tokyo has the potential to undermine trilateral security cooperation.

Perhaps the most significant problem facing cooperation is that the Obama administration has not taken seriously enough the threat to multi-lateral security cooperation posed by Japan. The Obama Administration has not been forceful and open enough in its criticism of the Abe administration. This has left President Park Geun-hye in the difficult position of balancing relations between President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Abe.

Under these circumstances, what can Korea and the U.S. do? Korea can set an example of just what can be accomplished under a moderate, democratic leadership that does not harbor aggressive or expansionist tendencies towards its allies. As for the U.S., it must firm up its relationship with Korea since it is America's most reliable ally in the region, politically, economically and militarily. However, Korea's position in this regional dynamic is complicated. An "Asian Paradox" exists whereby most Asian states count China as their largest trading partner but at the same time they are uneasy about their relations with China out of security concerns. This ultimately leads them to turn to the U.S. as a security ally. Yet the case of Korea is even more complicated because there are long cultural ties between the two countries and China is central to any reunification between the North and South that may occur.

In addition, a general resurgence in nationalism in the region complicates efforts to increase trilateral security cooperation. In Korea there is an increased sense of pride among most people on account of the impressive success of the Korean economy in recent years. When it comes to Japan, nationalism is certainly evident, but there is arguably less evidence of the country moving in a militaristic direction than is often claimed. Regardless of Abe's efforts to reinterpret the constitution, most Japanese people strongly oppose this. Furthermore, a Japanese military that is better able to assist allies in what would still be a limited capacity should not be a cause for alarm in Korea or the U.S. Underlying all of this is the fact that the Japanese people as a whole don't seem to like Koreans, a sentiment that is reciprocated by most Koreans towards the Japanese people.

So, this is a very difficult situation from the U.S. perspective. Washington would certainly prefer that Korea and Japan have good relations, therefore making trilateral security cooperation easier. As for solutions, it seems like common sense arrangements and policies could ameliorate these tensions. In particular, it makes no sense for Japan, or rather, the Japanese government to continue contesting the validity of "comfort women" claims, when all historical evidence supports them. No one gains from this, and Japan further distances itself from a potentially valuable ally in Korea.

Regarding the effect of China's rise on Korea, it was noted that Korea must increasingly rely on the alliance system, including its alliance with the U.S. At the same time, Sino-Korea relations are improving while North-South relations deteriorate. This demonstrates that while Korea needs to deal with China and the security challenges posed by its rise, China also provides opportunities for the Korean people, such as economic prosperity and assistance in dealing with North Korea and any eventual unification of the Korean Peninsula.

Finally, it was reiterated that China is crucial to resolving many issues important to the ROK, including the North Korean nuclear issue. Furthermore, despite the shared fears in Korea and Japan of China's rise, China should not be demonized. Demonizing China will hinder the greater goal of trilateral cooperation between Korea, Japan and China. Rather, engagement is both possible and necessary and there is reason to be optimistic about future Sino-Korean cooperation.

## **Session B: The U.S. Rebalance Policy and China's Response**

Much of the discussion of the second session underscored Korea's importance to the U.S. rebalance as well as its attempts to balance between the U.S. and a rising China. The U.S. is well aware of this balancing act on Korea's part and will not push it or any other country to choose between the U.S. and China. Regardless, Korean participants identified as a serious issue the balancing act that their country must perform in entertaining the competition and cooperation between the U.S. and China along with their different expectations

It was made clear that Korea must maintain its alliance with the U.S. for its own survival, whether it wants to or not. China currently regards Korea as a sovereign state, at least formally. However, if Korea were to weaken or end its alliance with the U.S. then Beijing could be tempted to treat it as a small vassal state. Therefore, Seoul must make maintaining the Korea-U.S. alliance a top priority. One component of this should involve developing its defense capabilities so that it is viewed as an equally valuable security partner to Japan.

There are also key issues that a rising China and increased Sino-U.S. interaction present. One issue is the potential transferring of wartime operational control (OpCon) from the U.S. to Korea. A Korean participant expressed concern that once OpCon is transferred from the U.S. to Korea then the Combined Forces Command will be dismantled, leading to the deactivation of the UN Command in Korea. If this occurs then all UN Command bases from which activities are conducted in Korea will be in Japan, which will make for an awkward security situation.

A second key issue is the emergence of North Korea as a nuclear power in the region and attempts to resolve this. There must be an understanding that peace on the Korean Peninsula is not guaranteed by the lack of nuclear weapons in North Korea. In fact, Pyongyang has conducted hostilities and provocations well before acquiring nuclear weapons. Therefore, the U.S. should not declare an end to the Korean War only as a result of the North dismantling its nuclear program.

While it is important for the ROK and the U.S. to have more frequent and frank discussions on these issues, it is generally agreed that the U.S. rebalance to Asia is a positive development. It builds upon what the U.S. has been doing for a long time, which is to serve as a security anchor in the region. The rebalance serves to signal to its allies that it will continue to do so. In addition, despite the high economic costs of engagement, including the massive trade deficit with China, the U.S. is pledging that it will not formulate protectionist policies in its dealings with the region. This has been demonstrated by the continued U.S. promotion of the TPP.

As has been the case for years, the U.S. does not seek a confrontation with China, especially with so many other global issues to contend with. However, China's increased expansionism and assertiveness in the South China Sea and East China Sea threaten a serious erosion of U.S. influence in the region. An important way to view U.S. influence

in East Asia is to examine how it leverages its alliances in the region to try to get China to do what it wants it to do without upsetting the regional order. So there is a real debate in the U.S. about how to deal with China. The rebalance is generally welcomed in Asia and it works up to a point, but not enough to stop Chinese expansionism, which has become a real problem under Xi Jinping's leadership. Ultimately, Korea plays an invaluable role in dealing with China and in the U.S rebalance more broadly.

### **Session C: U.S. Policy Regarding Japan's handling of History Issues with Korea and China**

When discussing the U.S. policy towards Japan and its handling of history issues with Korea and China, there are three levels of engagement to consider. One is the congressional level, where the U.S. Congress in 2007 passed a resolution demanding that Japan apologize for its use of "comfort women" during WWII. At the executive branch level, U.S. administrations have largely avoided speaking publicly about history issues, in part because of a fear of a backlash against the U.S. within Japan. However, in recent years there have been public statements by Ambassador Kennedy and President Obama that expressed disappointment with Japan over repeated visits to the Yasakuni Shrine. Fear of a deterioration of Japanese-Korean relations is a primary reason for this shift, given the security implications.

Finally, there is the level of non-governmental actors. Among academic circles, there is broad recognition that historical reconciliation must be included in the U.S. policy agenda for Northeast Asia. Analysts also contribute to the discussion, with many voicing criticism of the actions of the Abe administration. At the same time, analysts have been critical of China's use of history in stirring up nationalism, as well as rising nationalism within Korea. The Stanford History Center recently concluded a comparative study of history textbooks and concluded that in some ways, Japanese text books were *not* the most nationalistic in Northeast Asia.

Separating security concerns from historical concerns is a common prescription by academics and analysts in the U.S. It is still an open question as to whether this can be accomplished. One reason that this is so difficult is because Korean politicians find it difficult to mobilize domestic support for security cooperation with Japan as long as history issues remain unresolved. Second, Koreans largely view the bilateral relationship with Japan as an economic, rather than security relationship. The primary threat comes from North Korea, and Koreans view the U.S. security alliance as key to defending against this threat. Unfortunately, there is a perception problem wherein ordinary Koreans do not realize how a damaged ROK-Japan relationship will hurt the U.S. security position in Northeast Asia.

There is also a broader perception issue regarding history. In the West, history is perceived as based on the empirical record or what happened. In the East, history is more about moral views and judgments, which are subjective. This helps to explain the divergence between Japan and Korea on many historical issues. In addition, historical

issues are very difficult to resolve because they elicit emotions and they deal with national identities. Reconciliation becomes even more difficult as each country asserts a new national identity in one way or another.

In order to address these historical issues in a constructive manner, each country needs to stop evading responsibility. Specifically, on the Japanese side there is this perception of “Korea fatigue,” whereby the Koreans continue to move the goal post and refuse to move on certain issues while at the same time dismissing Japanese efforts to condone for its transgressions. On the Korean side, most Koreans feel that Japan has not apologized enough or that the apologies it has offered are insincere. If this pattern continues, there will be no reconciliation. What each country must do is to determine a point at which the two sides can meet, and strive to get there.

Lastly, education cannot be overlooked when addressing the issue of history. The simple fact that many students in Japan do not know anything about the “comfort women” issue is indicative of how insufficient or revisionist education exacerbates the problem. Honesty, respect and responsibility must accompany better education in the area of history in order to increase the prospects of reconciliation. Until this occurs, trilateral security cooperation remains a serious challenge.

#### **Session D: Xi Jinping, His Leadership, and the Outlook for Chinese Behavior at Home and Abroad**

The rise of China in East Asia has already posed challenges to the U.S. and its allies in the region. In an attempt to predict whether China’s rise will continue to be problematic or peaceful, it is useful to examine the leadership of China’s new president, Xi Jinping. Will he be more like Deng Xiaoping and focus on constructive reform or will he be more like Vladimir Putin and focus more on power consolidation? The consensus seems to be that he will act more like Putin. Domestically, his Putin-like qualities can be seen in the rolling back of efforts to open up that had been slowly occurring. For example, Xi has overseen the crackdown on foreign companies, suppression of separatist groups, censorship, and even oppression of state-controlled institutions such as the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences.

Xi Jinping is perhaps the most powerful Chinese leader that the U.S. and its allies have had to deal with since Deng. Unlike his predecessors, Xi received all three of his positions at once (head of the state, party and military). We see less of a collective leadership that characterized the presidency of Hu Jintao and more of a single, strong leader with a real vision. He has already asserted control in many areas, including the military and through his anti-corruption campaign. However, unlike Deng, he has failed to build broad support. In addition, he may be acting *too* assertively and alienating many constituencies in the process. China has very strongly entrenched interest groups and we are seeing some signs of pushback against his new initiatives.

This pushback by powerful constituencies is perhaps one source of his weakness, since he may find his initiatives blunted or watered down in a few years’ time as the state

system that he is trying to shake up proves to be too strong and resilient. This identification of weakness can be extended to China's foreign policy. Despite continuing the assertive foreign policy begun under his predecessor, China is in a very difficult position in Asia, and increasingly in the global arena. There are only a handful of countries in Asia that view China favorably and even fewer internationally. With very few allies in the world and pressing problems at home, this is not a country acting from a position of great strength. Furthermore, China's so-called "charm offensive" is not as effective as many think, as China continues to find ways to alienate countries that could otherwise serve as allies.

Regarding Korea's position in Asia as China rises, it is actually one of those few countries that have a favorable view of China. This is in part because Korea needs China's help to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue as well as to manage any eventual reunification of the Korean peninsula. Furthermore, while Sino-U.S. competition will likely continue for the foreseeable future, Korea is not simply a nation caught in between these two powers, but rather, it seeks to bridge the gap between them. That said, Korea is still concerned about any potential U.S. retrenchment. As most other participants indicated throughout the course of the roundtable, the U.S. rebalance is important and welcomed.

By the conclusion of the roundtable, a few things were clear. One is the difficulty, but continued necessity of Korea-Japan reconciliation. History remains one of the most significant obstacles to this goal, though a reform in education and greater non-governmental cooperation over the issue could help provide solutions. In addition, a thawing of this bilateral relationship would make true trilateral security cooperation possible, which is as important as ever with a rising and assertive China. The U.S. rebalance to Asia is important to meeting all of these challenges, and Korea continues to play an important role in this policy.

*By Michael Bouffard, Program Coordinator, Sigur Center for Asian Studies, GWU*

## **Roundtable Agenda**

Moderator: Prof. Sutter, President SONG D. S.

### ***Session A: China's Rise and U.S.-Japan-ROK Trilateral Cooperation***

Chairperson: Professor Robert Sutter

U.S.: Gregg Brazinsky, Michael Yahuda

ROK: Dr. LEE Tai Hwan, Dr. CHOI Kang

### ***Session B. The U.S. Rebalance Policy and China's Response***

Chairperson: President SONG Dae Sung

U.S.: Robert Sutter

ROK: Dr. PARK Yong Ok, Dr. CHONG Chol Ho

### ***Session C: U.S. Policy Regarding Japan's handling of History Issues with Korea and China***

Chairperson: President SONG Dae Sung

U.S.: Daqing Yang, Jisoo Kim

ROK: Prof. KIM Ho Sup, Dr. CHOI Kang

### ***Session D: Xi Jinping, His Leadership, and the Outlook for Chinese Behavior at Home and Abroad***

Chairperson: Professor Robert Sutter

U.S.: Bruce Dickson, David Shambaugh

ROK: Dr. LEE Tai Hwan

## **Roundtable Participants**

### **ROK (10)**

- **Dr. SONG Dae Sung**, President, Sejong Institute
- **Dr. LEE Tai Hwan**, Director, Center for China Studies, Sejong Institute
- **BG(R.) Dr. CHONG Chol Ho**, Research Fellow, Sejong Institute; former Commander of Air University,
- **Mr. YU Myung Hwan, Chairman**, Board of Trustees, Sejong University; former Foreign Minister of Korea
- **LTG(R.) Dr. PARK Yong Ok**, former Vice Minister, Ministry of National Defense
- **Prof. RHEE Sang Woo**, President, the New Asia Research Institute (NARI); former President, Hallym University
- **Prof. HA Young Sun**, Chairman, East Asia Institute (EAI); former Professor Seoul National University
- **Prof. KIM Ho Sup**, former Vice President, Chung-Ang University; former President of the Korean Political Science Association (KPSA)
- **Dr. CHOI Kang**, Vice President, Asan Institute for Policy Studies
- **Dr. KIM Jina**, Research Fellow, Korean Institute for Defense Analyses (KIDA)

### **US (7)**

- **Prof. Gregg Brazinsky**, George Washington University
- **Prof. Bruce J. Dickson**, Director, Sigur Center, George Washington University
- **Prof. Jisoo Kim**, George Washington University
- **Prof. David Shambaugh**, George Washington University
- **Prof. Robert Sutter**, George Washington University
- **Prof. Michael Yahuda**, George Washington University
- **Prof. Daqing Yang**, George Washington University