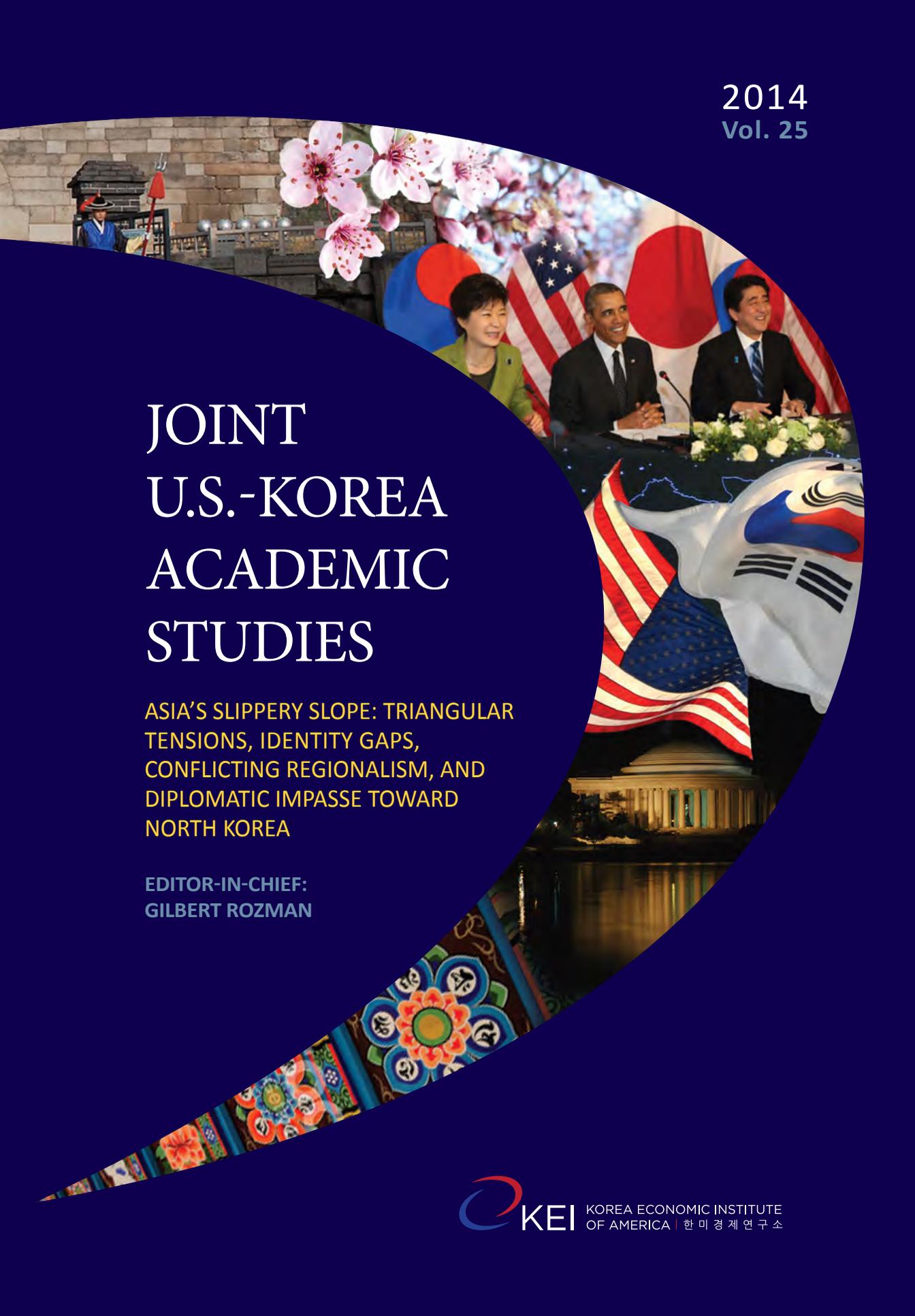


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SOUTH KOREA'S TRIANGULAR RELATIONS



China-South Korea-U.S. Relations

Gilbert Rozman

After the collapse of the Six-Party Talks in 2008 and the confrontational setting of 2009-12 when Sino-South Korean relations were mostly troubled, a new dynamic has emerged in the China-South Korea-U.S. triangle under Xi Jinping, Park Geun-hye, and Barack Obama. In this chapter I review earlier dynamics over a quarter century, assess the triangle as recently seen from each of the three corners, and reflect on the challenges that lie ahead that could alter the current dynamics. In the shadows of this triangle is North Korea, whose policies continue to exert a decisive impact.

This triangle matters primarily for three compelling reasons. First, it is the foremost challenge in South Korean diplomacy, which is concerned, above all, with managing North Korea.¹ Second, it is a litmus test for China's strategic thinking, whose policies to North Korea are of prime concern to South Korea and, at times, the United States.² Finally, it is the principal arena for how the United States is managing North Korea, well understood by all of these countries.³ Even when the ostensible subject at both diplomatic settings and academic seminars is bilateral relations involving any two of these countries, the discussion turns ineluctably to this broader triangular context. On the sixtieth anniversary of the U.S.-ROK alliance when commentators considered new challenges for the alliance, China cast a deep shadow, as North Korea long has. In the same year when Park actively wooed Xi to improve relations, the U.S. alliance was never far in the background. Even in Sino-U.S. relations with their far greater scope, North Korea is arguably the first priority and that means, especially to the U.S. side, coordinating closely with South Korea on this aspect of Sino-U.S. relations.⁴ Triangularity has been unmistakably advancing in 2013-14, as Sino-ROK diplomacy grew noticeably more active and the United States gave, at least, its tacit support. In early 2014, the dynamic was changing, as U.S. disappointment with China's dealings with North Korea was reflected in greater efforts to strengthen U.S.-ROK deterrence.

In the case of South Korea, Park Geun-hye's slogans of "trustpolitik" and "Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI)" cannot be discussed in depth without turning into an examination of the triangle with the United States and China. Unlike Japan, which is pressing the United States to solidify two vs. one in a triangle seen as containing Chinese aggression, South Korea is searching for multilateralism drawing China and the United States closer. This is a more complicated process, especially in recent months, as the Sino-U.S. gap has widened. When Park was greeted eagerly in Washington in May 2013, then Koreans watched the Obama-Xi Sunnylands summit hopefully in June 2013, and finally Park had what was considered a successful visit to Beijing that same month, prospects for a South Korean initiative to capitalize on the triangle appeared to rise. By early 2014 they had dimmed, but Seoul was ready to try to operationalize Park's ideas, which, at a general level, had been greeted in 2013 with interest.⁵ In the background were increased contacts with North Korea, which China welcomed as a possible path to resuming the Six-Party Talks while the United States responded doubtfully that there was little prospect of a breakthrough.

For China, the triangle with South Korea and the United States has a different meaning rooted less in a priority for denuclearization and reunification than in a geostrategic and geo-cultural outlook on a future Northeast Asia in which U.S. influence is greatly reduced. In 2013 an unpredictable new leader, Kim Jong-un, responded defiantly to China's advice, while an

encouraging veteran figure, Park Geun-hye, cultivated its support. No wonder China gave Park reason to proceed,⁶ particularly against the background of its demonization of Japan and Park's own acrimonious relationship with Abe Shinzo. No triangular framework in Asia offered China as much promise as this one, with China, perhaps, anticipating that ROK-U.S. relations would eventually be made more complicated by differences in how to deal with China as well as Japan.

Seeing no utility for the Six-Party Talks, the United States has continued under the Obama administration to make sure that on North Korean issues it would permit as little distance as possible between its position and that of South Korea, even as it also put management of North Korea at the top of its many priorities in working with China. Thus, triangularity was built into the U.S. approach to what has long been the most serious security challenge in the region. Yet, casting a shadow on this triad was the growing sense that other security challenges were growing, including those in the South China and East China seas that put the United States and China in direct opposition to each other. In contrast to Seoul's eagerness for sustaining the triangle with a narrow, shared focus and Beijing's ambition to utilize the triangle for a broader, ultimately divisive purpose, Washington approached the triangle much more cautiously, viewing it through the prism of multiple, conflicting frameworks.

PAST DYNAMICS IN THE SINO-SOUTH KOREAN-U.S. TRIANGLE

Until South Korea pursued normalization of relations with China from the end of the 1980s, alliance relations were scarcely affected by China's behavior, apart from the closer ties resulting from Chinese reinforcement of North Korean belligerence and the increasing appeals after Sino-U.S. normalization by both Washington and Seoul to Beijing to seize the opportunity for a change in its policies toward the peninsula. Given U.S. blessing for "nordpolitik" and China's reluctance to range beyond trade relations with South Korea, prior to Sino-ROK normalization the triangle also did not draw much concern. The alliance seemed impervious to normalizing contacts.

During the decade between normalization and the second nuclear crisis over North Korea, leading soon to the Six-Party Talks, new factors influenced triangular ties. As North Korea sunk into famine amidst isolation in the mid-90s, Seoul became bolder about seeking more support from Beijing and relying less on its ally, especially when Kim Dae-jung launched the Sunshine Policy. The rapidly growing economic relations gave the public on both sides reason to see growing potential for other types of ties. With China "lying low" in its regional policies and eventually embracing proposals for multilateralism and with Seoul becoming enthusiastic for regional diplomacy as well, the scope of interactions expanded with Washington on the outside.⁷ Anger at Japan was rising in China with the "patriotic education" campaign, and sporadically spiked in South Korea too as a democratic society now more sensitive to affronts. In these circumstances, awareness of a national identity gap was minimized: they saw each other mostly as economic partners working together for regionalism, while each was more conscious of identity gaps with the United States (as anti-American sentiments spread in South Korea to 2003) and Japan. With the election of

Roh Moo-hyun as president at the end of 2002, South Koreans were emboldened to express greater resentment toward the United States but were restrained toward China.

The Sino-ROK-U.S. triangle in the final years of Roh Moo-hyun's tenure gave one impression and during the period of Lee Myung-bak's tenure gave quite a different one. In the Roh era, Seoul groped for a role between Washington and Beijing: to be a "hub," to have an independent voice on North Korea, and even to be a "balancer." Yet, Roh found that he lacked the clout with either great power and real leverage over North Korea to gain much traction. China showed its disregard with the mood of the South Korean public with its Koguryo claims, revealing its arrogance about history with serious implications for trust in dealing with the future of North Korea. U.S. distrust came in response to Roh's unilateral offers to North Korea, complicating the strategy for denuclearization and playing into China's strategy. Roh found that he had little room to maneuver; he misjudged the configuration of the triangle, as a still cautious China faced an assertive George W. Bush administration.⁸ This was a time of incipient triangularity, but Sino-U.S. cooperation on North Korea limited its scope. The external environment did not give the Seoul the opportunity Roh sought.

Lee faced a newly assertive China, which might have been more receptive to Roh but now was dismissive of Lee's efforts to prioritize U.S. relations, given suspicions that there was no chance of improving North Korean relations. In 2009 Beijing shifted toward support for Pyongyang despite its belligerence, and Lee drew even closer to Washington.⁹ This remained the pattern until Lee's presidential term ended with triangularity largely in abeyance. Indeed, deteriorating Sino-U.S. relations in the face of aggressive Chinese moves and the Obama "rebalance" to Asia marginalized Seoul. A challenge for Park when she took office was to reactivate this moribund triangle. It appeared that she had the initiative, but China, under its new leader, Xi Jinping, has not relinquished its role as the driving force in the region, attentive to U.S. relations, intensifying rivalry with Japan, and the difficult challenge of North Korea's conduct.

THE CHINESE ANGLE ON THE SINO-SOUTH KOREAN-U.S. TRIANGLE

When China entered the Korean War it was alarmed about American troops on its border, the extension of power of a distrusted regime in South Korea, the failure of a fellow socialist state, and the global balance of power after it had already leaned to one side toward the Soviet Union and away from the U.S.-led capitalist bloc of states. Fifty years later, as it grew more deeply involved in the Korean Peninsula with the encouragement of the Sunshine Policy and North Korea's new diplomatic strategy, leading to the Six-Party Talks, a similar set of concerns were in the forefront. While many observers focused on China's vague concern about "peace and stability" and others decided that China's priority was preventing a massive outflow of refugees across its border, there was always ample evidence that foremost in its calculations was continued wariness about U.S. troops and influence on a long-sensitive border as well as the balance of power implications from the removal of not just a buffer state but an enemy state of the United States and its allies.¹⁰ Moreover, distrust of the leadership and the society of South Korea is deep-seated, as reflected in what could be

called the “culture wars” fought both on the Internet and through the mass media in the years of Lee Myung-bak’s tenure.¹¹ However discomfited China seems to be at times with North Korea’s hide-bound regime, it is considered by many in the party and security establishment, as well as like-minded citizens on China’s side, in an essentially polarized world and region in national identity, not economic, terms.

Given the failure of Pyongyang to coordinate with Beijing in handling diplomatic, economic, and military challenges, a flexible strategy has been required to manage relations with Seoul and Washington in regard to peninsular non-economic affairs. Seoul’s degree of deference has changed over the past two decades, as has Beijing’s interest in talking with Seoul about Pyongyang. Rising deference under Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, despite its limitations, drew a positive response. Signs of reduced deference under Lee Myung-bak, exacerbated by anger at Beijing’s silence over the North Korean attacks in 2010, elicited a negative response. Knowing how China is becoming more or less cooperative while making North Korea ever more economically and diplomatically dependent on it, Park Geun-hye has tried to find the “Goldilocks” solution of coordinating while drawing a red line against rewarding North Korea without meaningful reciprocal actions. At a time when the leadership in Beijing is frustrated with Pyongyang, that strategy is acceptable. The result has been more encouragement to Seoul to coordinate closer with Beijing and more emphasis on positive cooperation with Washington.

In 2013-14 there are clear reasons why Beijing is encouraging Seoul, but one should be wary of drawing wider conclusions about some significant change of direction. As noted above, it is both a reward to Park for her continuous, conciliatory efforts and a warning to Kim Jung-un against his disregard of China’s guidance. Kim has it within his power to change China’s calculus. If he is more respectful of its strategy, which would lead to some de-escalation of his provocative military build-up and embrace of economic reform, he could tilt the balance, perhaps in the process dividing South Korean society and its government from the presumed, more skeptical U.S. reaction. Other reasons for Beijing to convey a positive outlook toward Seoul is that this is in line with the ongoing strategy of isolating Tokyo and keeping Washington interested in a “new type of great power relations.” At a time when its strategic priorities are in the East China Sea and the South China Sea, calming tensions further north serves a broader strategic objective. Finally, an upbeat atmosphere with Seoul can promote talks for a China-Korea FTA, serving as an urgent counterweight to the U.S.-Japan pursuit of TPP, which would create a regional economic framework worrisome to China, even if some economic reformers might use it to advance domestic changes.

While a small number of articles published in China have suggested a recent change of heart toward North Korea, raising the prospects for closer coordination with both South Korea and the United States, many other Chinese publications continue to put the onus on these two countries for the existence of the crisis on the peninsula and for the ongoing failure to take essential steps to resolve it.¹² If Russian sources are to be believed, then the message they have heard from Chinese officials is decidedly on the side of this majority of Chinese writings. Georgy Toloraya on March 13, 2014 made this point clearly, accentuating what Alexander Lukin writes in the conclusion to his chapter. He describes the Crimean crisis as proof that the West is working to contain Russia and that this will affect problems elsewhere, including on the Korean Peninsula, where the Cold War never ended.

Expecting Russo-U.S. cooperation to dry up, he sees closer Sino-Russian coordination. In the past, Toloraya adds, Russia opposed the “U.S. strategy to isolate and eventually dismantle the North Korean regime,” using the nuclear issue as a pretext, but it was in agreement in showing concern about the North’s impact on non-proliferation, military provocations such as missile launches, and human rights. Russia backed UN resolutions, implemented sanction agreements, and had most of its banks refuse to deal with the North. Now, however, he argues, more Russians will see the nuclear deterrent of North Korea as justified, it will be more lenient about investing in the North, and may even assist in modernizing the North’s industrial infrastructure. Suggesting that Russians will perceive the U.S. threat of military intervention in Ukraine as similar to U.S. conduct toward North Korea, Toloraya warns that Russia’s position will probably shift closer to Chinese views, which could contribute to the renewal of confrontation between continental and maritime powers. In this argument, the Russian specialist on Korea assumes a Chinese posture that supports North Korea and welcomes such a shift from Russia toward a joint posture of three versus three on peninsular affairs.¹³

Toloraya’s interpretation of Chinese thinking about North Korea omits the tensions of late in Sino-North Korean relations. It tries to fit China’s thinking into a renewed Cold War framework, showcased in Russia during the crisis over Ukraine. Yet, the idea that China considers the situation in Ukraine grounds for military conflict and a renewal of the Cold War appears to be an exaggeration. Russia may be desperate in early 2014 and determined to reestablish what it can of the Soviet Union’s range of control, but China has no cause for similar desperation. Moreover, for China, North Korea is not some pawn in a great power Cold War, but a target for transforming the entire Korean Peninsula and reshaping the balance of power in East Asia. Lack of cooperation by Pyongyang in Beijing’s strategy requires a Chinese response, not just indifference because it is time to turn harshly against the United States and South Korea, as a U.S. ally. A closer look at Sino-North Korean tensions makes this clearer.

In late February 2014 Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin visited Pyongyang. In early March Foreign Minister Wang Yi made a statement about the Korean Peninsula.¹⁴ A strong warning by North Korea on March 14 directed at the United States could be seen as an indirect response to China’s diplomacy. In one personal communication, it was suggested, although difficult to verify, that this opens a window on secretive interactions between Beijing and Pyongyang. First, Wang Yi reemphasized China’s insistence on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. In the DPRK statement, there is no open criticism of this position, but the United States is accused of behaving foolishly by opposing the DPRK’s nuclear deterrence and letting loose a string of reckless remarks.¹⁵ One wonders who really is blamed for “reckless remarks.” Second, Wang called for restraint, goodwill, and building mutual trust before noting the DPRK accusation against the United States for a policy “aimed at undermining the ideology of the DPRK...and swallowing up all Koreans and the whole of Korea by force of arms for aggression.” Third, Wang is reported to have called for dialogue and opposed confrontation, which will only bring tension and war. In turn, the DPRK accuses the U.S. “patience strategy” of hoping the DPRK will make changes first and responds that the DPRK will “wait with a high degree of patience” for leadership change in the United States. Insisting that “national sovereignty is more

important than human rights,” the DPRK statement, according to this interpretation, is a message to China that it too values sovereignty over human rights and should not be criticizing a like-minded country. In asserting that the United States “would be well advised to mind its own business, being aware of where it stands, before talking nonsense about others’ affairs,” the statement may be making China the real target. It was a sign of troubled relations, which facilitated the greater triangular cooperation with Seoul and Washington in 2013 and early 2014.

The personal communication detects a “veiled back-and-forth between Beijing and Pyongyang over the nuclear issues and the Jang matter.”¹⁶ This reflects recalibrating of China’s position, perhaps in part due to the purge of Jang Song-taek and the group forging economic ties with China, and a sharpening of the resistance from North Korea. Against this backdrop, South Korea and the United States are naturally reticent about doing something that may cause China to reconsider its posture. The danger from North Korea seems to be growing, and China is the driving force in responding as the United States and South Korea keep a close watch and tailor their triangular actions accordingly. The overall point is that in 2013 China’s posture toward Pyongyang had been good for triangularity. After the Jang purge, China’s concern over North Korea may have turned more to instability, reverberating in comments to U.S. officials that led them to conclude that China was less inclined to put adequate pressure on North Korea. The dynamics in triangular or quadrangular relations keep impacting the diplomacy toward Pyongyang, but China’s calculations are what matter most.

North Korea has it within its power to change the dynamics of the triangle as seen in China. Overtures to Beijing could widen the Sino-U.S. divide and leave Seoul in more of a quandary. New cooperation with Seoul as well as Beijing could put Washington in a quandary. China’s strategy for North Korea is likely to be at sharp variance with the strategies of the other two countries; so its stance, reflecting frustration over the failure of that strategy, is the most favorable for this triangle, but it is uncertain to last. A more bellicose North Korea is more likely to sustain this sort of triangularity than would a more flexible, North Korea, recognizing that it has continued options for diplomacy. Yet, even if Pyongyang grows more assertive, Chinese calculations of U.S. relations—more somber in the light of Obama’s late April tour of East Asia—could be decisive. It is this Chinese response that puts the triangle in new doubt.

THE SOUTH KOREAN ANGLE ON THE SINO-SOUTH KOREAN-U.S. TRIANGLE

Of the three countries, South Korea continues to take triangularity most seriously. It is anxious not to be left as a middle power to the mercy of two great powers making decisions about the Korean Peninsula on the basis of their own national interests or national identities. Washington could snub its ally over a preoccupation with human rights or urgent denuclearization without adequate consideration of the dynamics of inter-Korean relations or the security priorities in South Korea. Even more likely, Beijing could marginalize South Korea, given the importance it places on the North.

Park Geun-hye has seized the opportunity of Xi Jinping's more impatient response to Kim Jong-un and Barack Obama's continued "strategic patience" to take the lead in the triangulation of diplomacy toward North Korea. She has articulated slogans for the new approach, suggesting that Seoul is the initiator in building trust among the three countries and in striving for a multilateral replacement or interim supplement for the Six-Party Talks. Washington has delegated to Park both tactical leadership in moves to test Pyongyang's readiness to change course and diplomatic flexibility in seeing what further steps Beijing will take in support of common objectives. Beijing is willing to discuss North Korea with more seriousness than before and shows signs of accepting Park's balance of engagement and insistence on denuclearization. Given this triangular atmosphere, officials and public opinion in Seoul are emboldened to think that it is on the right track and should devise new ways of working together.

Some may exaggerate Seoul's role, overlooking the limited room available for it to operate and the temporary circumstances that allow this. They may be correct in thinking that Obama is satisfied with current arrangements within the triangle and with Seoul-Beijing relations, but China's behavior in maritime disputes and Japan's tensions with China could reverberate to Seoul's detriment. Even more problematic is the assumption that Beijing is deferential to South Korea as having an inherent right to speak on peninsular matters. There is a dearth of exploration of its motives, although even during the Park-Xi summit Chinese wording was carefully parsed to reveal uncertain alignment of thinking. The old problem of overestimation of what Seoul can accomplish—seen especially under Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun—is difficult to avoid. That is not to say that Seoul is without options in today's setting.

Eschewing the ambitions inherent in the notion of a "balancer," Park can continue to seek opportunities to serve as a "facilitator." If Pyongyang decides to be provocative in ways that stretch the forbearance of Washington and Beijing as well as Seoul, she is likely to have a constructive opening to assist the two great powers in finding a common response. This is not likely to be easy, given different views of sanctions and military build-ups or exercises in response to North Korean actions. Yet, there is little optimism that Kim Jong-un will opt for any course other than provocations; so Park may have considerably more time to explore ways to keep working with Xi and Obama. If the Northeast Asia Peace and Security Initiative starts slowly with modest ambitions, it may prove to be accepted by the other two states as constructive. More likely is an outcome where it gains little traction as great power rivalries deepen.

There is little upside to Seoul's quest for a more active role and considerable room for disappointment. The two principal problems are the presumed incompatibility between Beijing and Seoul's strategic thinking about North Korea, and the rising potential for sharper discord between Beijing and Washington. As one or both of these problems comes to the forefront, there is little that Seoul can do. The fact that Vladimir Putin is renewing Cold War images with his foreign policy and rhetoric and Abe Shinzo is oblivious to the strategic costs of his historical revisionism makes the challenges ahead even harder for Park to navigate. She needs to lower expectations.

THE U.S. ANGLE ON THE SINO-SOUTH KOREAN-U.S. TRIANGLE

From the perspective of Washington, there is little awareness of the significance of South Korea as a factor boosting bilateral to trilateral relations. Washington views Seoul as important in coordinating on responses to Pyongyang's behavior, but in the absence of any optimism about denuclearization or resumption of diplomacy with the prospect of leading to that essential objective, Seoul is seen primarily as a force for holding the line. As for its diplomatic dealings with Beijing, they are viewed not as a way to change Chinese thinking, but as reinforcement of the frequent talks between U.S. and Chinese leaders to find some common ground, especially in the event of new North Korean provocations. Few think that Chinese leaders with their strong convictions about how to keep the North Korean regime afloat are in the mood to take South Korean proposals seriously. In short, the Seoul-Beijing path to management of the North Korean challenge is welcomed, but it is not perceived to be a promising alternative to the Washington-Beijing pathway or to have strategic gravitas that would warrant conceiving of it as part of a triangular configuration.

Washington is ambivalent about closer Seoul-Beijing ties, welcoming them when it thinks that they play a constructive role in managing the North Korean threat. When concern about Roh Moo-hyun's encouragement of anti-Americanism and dalliance with great power balancing and idealistic enablement of North Korea was at a peak, Washington was doubtful about Roh's policies. Also, when Chinese cooperation over North Korea appears to be in doubt, U.S. officials question the efficacy of counting on its support. Yet, for the most part, since the 1990s, Washington has emphasized new efforts to encourage Beijing to play a more active role and has considered Seoul a positive influence toward that objective. Thus, reassured by Park Geun-hye's close consultations with the Obama administration, U.S. officials have not deviated from the response that there is no distance at all between the policies of the two states.

In mid-2013, celebrations of the sixtieth anniversary of the U.S.-ROK alliance paid homage to its enduring success and expressed optimism about its renewal in the face of new challenges. Yet, there was already a cloud over rising difficulties in the context of triangular relations, especially with Japan but also with China and, to a lesser degree, with North Korea. This cloud darkened considerably over the Japanese triangle in the fall of 2013, and even more in the first months of 2014, but the shadow of the Chinese triangle was not immune to such anxiety. After all, relations between Japan and China kept worsening, and Sino-U.S. relations also deteriorated to some degree. To the extent that Seoul's relations with Beijing appear to be out of step with Washington's, and some would argue with Tokyo's too, this complicates the Sino-ROK-U.S. triangle. Clashing appeals from Tokyo and Seoul to Washington in seminars before D.C. think tank audiences brought new challenges to the surface.

As long as Beijing keeps pressure on Pyongyang, avoids coercive actions in the East and South China seas, and does not join Moscow in what may be construed as moves leading to a new cold war, then Washington is unlikely to object to Seoul sustaining its measured overtures to Beijing centered on managing Pyongyang. Yet, much could go wrong between Washington and Beijing, leaving Seoul with little leverage. There is an assumption in the

United States that the U.S.-ROK alliance leg of the triangle is the determining factor when security is in doubt, and that would be strengthened.

Uncertainty arises from the economic ties between China and South Korea, which strategic analysts tend to overlook. Although there have been trade wars in which China showed a ruthless response, few anticipate the sort of economic pressure that China exhibited at times toward Japan or the Philippines. As seen in the economic sanctions placed on Russia in response to its actions in Crimea as well as on North Korea and Iran, linkages between security and economics are intensifying. These can affect the way triangularity evolves in a time of crisis and hardball policies.

CONCLUSION

The China-South Korea-U.S. triangle puts Seoul between two great powers testing each other for regional hegemony and influence in the Korean Peninsula. One power is consumed with the threat of nuclear weapons to be deliverable by long-range missiles and finds North Korea anathema for its egregious human rights violations. It expects and finds South Korea to be of like mind and a close ally, but the threat perceptions of the two differ, as does the impact of national identity. In turn, the other power prioritizes transforming the regional balance of power and considers criticism of human rights to be a prelude to charges against its own political system. Its view of South Korea is more ambivalent, doubting its security thinking, the way values affect its policies, and its intentions toward North Korea in reunification. Add to this mix the sharply opposed attitudes toward the ROK-U.S. alliance and we are left with a combustible mix of three bilateral relations that fit together awkwardly in certain circumstances, but have the potential to grind against each other for reasons such as North Korea shifting to engagement with China and a degree of economic reform, North Korea enticing South Korea with gestures of national identity appeal, Sino-U.S. relations deteriorating over one of many causes, and U.S. policies turning more inflexible and intolerant of South Korean overtures to China or North Korea.

If we recognize that China is the driving force in the triangle, we should ask under what circumstances does it welcome the triad working together for common cause. In 2013-14 such circumstances were present: Chinese anger at North Korea, Chinese eagerness to isolate Japan and damage its relations with South Korea, willingness by China to emphasize improving relations with the United States, a conciliatory mood in Seoul and by the South Korean president toward China, South Korean hesitation to broaden the alliance with the United States into arenas beyond the peninsula, and an upbeat atmosphere in Sino-South Korean FTA negotiations and economic ties. It is these factors that bring positive triangularity to the fore. With other triangles in which South Korea is involved more troubled, there may be spillover damaging to this triangle of highest priority. It is advancing, but in precarious circumstances.

As Valery Denisov and Alexander Lukin argue, North Korea is a geopolitical target for both Russia and China, which is becoming more salient to Russia in 2014 as it perceives Ukraine through the lens of a new cold war. Instead of this triangle being a force for South Korean economic engagement of North Korea in the development of infrastructure of region-wide significance, it is turning more into a basis of pressure against the ROK-U.S. alliance,

complicating Seoul's attempts to maintain a balance between Washington and Beijing. At the same time, the Tokyo-Seoul-Washington triangle is strengthening in the spring of 2014. As Sue Mi Terry shows, U.S. efforts can and now are boosting this triangle. While the changes do not go far to support what Sung-Yoon Lee considers to be a more balanced Beijing-Seoul-Tokyo triangle, they strengthen the deterrence triangle in advance of Pyongyang's next move. For Beijing, remaining hostile to Tokyo and turning more critical of Washington while welcoming new overtures from Moscow, the conditions that boosted the value of Seoul in triangular contexts, especially with Washington, may now be fading away.

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