

Ambitious Periphery Can Strengthen the Core

by Ryo Hinata-Yamaguchi and Seongho Hong

Ryo Hinata-Yamaguchi (ryo@pacforum.org) is a resident Vasey Fellow and Seongho Hong (seongho@pacforum.org) is a resident Kelly Fellow at Pacific Forum CSIS.

“One ‘aw, shucks’ wipes out a thousand ‘attaboys.’” This old saw epitomizes relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK). Despite incremental progress in the bilateral relationship, insensitive remarks by politicians, media, analysts, and some in civil society from both countries have fuelled an action-reaction cycle of obnoxious nationalism. Under these circumstances, progress toward meaningful cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo seems distant.

To alleviate these problems, both Seoul and Tokyo must coordinate to conceptualize cooperation as short, medium and long-term goals. Unless the two governments set out a more elaborate and structured framework, cooperation will remain underappreciated and undervalued, making it all too easy to abandon proposals, as seen in the last-minute postponement of the Acquisition Crossing Supporting Agreement (ACSA) and General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) by Seoul and Tokyo in June 2012.

The lack of coordination between Seoul and Tokyo presents an irresistible opportunity to the DPRK. The recent visit of the Japanese prime minister’s special adviser to Pyongyang is one example in which the DPRK used the long-pending abduction issue to induce Japan to bypass trilateral US-Japan-ROK options. As long as the ROK and Japan remain skeptical about bilateral cooperation, the DPRK will have the opportunity to leverage the wedge between the ROK and Japan. To influence the DPRK more effectively, the ROK must have multi-faceted cooperation with Japan.

Fortunately, the relationship between Seoul and Tokyo has not collapsed. There have been significant attempts to build a partnership between Japan and the ROK, including defense-level dialogues, mutual visits by naval vessels, bilateral exercises such as search and rescue exercises, bilateral cooperation in the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti, and observing the other’s exercises with the US. Still, deep-rooted socio-political issues (which have little to do with emerging security threats) block real progress.

Poor conceptualization of what Japan-ROK cooperation does (or does not) involve is a problem. Above all, security cooperation between Japan and the ROK should not be a mere “one-plus-one” sum of capabilities. Rather, it should take advantage of each other’s niche capabilities to complement strengths and fill gaps.

Low-hanging fruit include Japan-ROK cooperation on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR)

operations, and maritime security in the seas surrounding Japan and the Korean Peninsula. Coordination and cooperation should be considered in intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, counter-terrorism, counter-piracy, dispatching augmentation staff, and missile defense.

However, there are many other opportunities in areas beyond the defense realm, including border and transport security, joint medical cooperation in ASEAN countries, diplomatic security, energy security, Arctic security, human security, space cooperation, rare earths recycling. Details of these possibilities were explored by next-generation security specialists from Japan, the ROK, and the US at Pacific Forum CSIS extended deterrence dialogues earlier this year and are detailed in “Hanging Together,” a new publication.

Expanding Japan-ROK bilateral (and Japan-ROK-US trilateral relations) beyond their traditionally narrow focus will help forge a more ambitious vision that goes beyond historical sensitivities and opens a pathway to closer ties. By being ambitious on the periphery of the Japan-ROK relationship, we can strengthen its core. Coordination of niche opportunities in which both countries facilitate each other’s capabilities would benefit regional stability.

There has been endless talk about the things a Japan-ROK partnership can achieve. But as long as historical and sovereignty issues dominate headlines, there will be no quantum leap in their relationship. Mending troubled ties and directing our two countries toward partnership demands real leadership from both sides to explore initiatives across a range of agendas. It’s hard, but not impossible. Here’s a road map.

First, at the strategic level, both Seoul and Tokyo need to discuss and coordinate ways that bilateral cooperation fits within their respective regional interests. Beijing and Pyongyang are eager to increase their strategic leverage and widen gaps in the US alliance network. Japan and the ROK must cooperate to counter that effort. Yet there are differences in how Seoul and Tokyo perceive China’s regional role. Those differences need to be understood and reconciled.

Second, discussions are needed on the domestic issues – social and economic – that shape foreign and security politics. For example, both countries have demographic trajectories that will create fiscal and manpower issues. Understanding these constraints is a prerequisite to partnership between Seoul and Tokyo, and they can work together to offset these constraints and costs.

Third, both governments should be more transparent when dealing with sensitive issues such as defense cooperation. The suspicion that the ACSA and GSOMIA were pushed in a backroom amplified public concerns in Korea. If the ROK government transparently explained the need for GSOMIA with Japan and the fact that it had already signed GSOMIA

with other 24 nations, public anxiety in Korea would be reduced.

Fourth, security dialogues must address the *whats* and *hows* of a Japan-ROK partnership. As a first step, Seoul and Tokyo should exchange and acknowledge each other's expectations and roles. Then, the two governments should discuss capabilities, contingency plans, inter-operability, objectives, and scenarios that they work on as partners.

Finally, there needs to be a frank discussion of each other's defense capabilities and how they impact the Japan-ROK partnership. The ROK is trying to push through the Defense Reform Plan and transfer of Operational Control of forces during wartime from the US to the ROK. Japan is reviewing its National Defense Program Guidelines, which involve significant improvements in operational aspects of the Japan Self-Defense Forces. Efforts by both countries to realign their defense capabilities inevitably affect the nature of their cooperation, and a thorough discussion to set agendas is essential.

Both Japan and the ROK often use the term "future-oriented" to express hopes for a cooperative relationship. This should not and cannot be intended to ignore the past. Japan must reach out to the ROK and understand that its revisionist nationalism will provoke further anti-Japanese sentiments from the ROK. For its part, rather than asking Japan for still more apologies, the ROK needs to suggest a common agenda to cooperate, such as the abduction issue, to make it easier for Japan to reach out to South Korea.

Nationalism will persist in each country and the more extreme versions will continue to captivate both countries' media. But it must be made clear that neither accurately reflects the realities or the will of each society, let alone their national interests. Rather than playing up their differences, greater attention should be paid to their similarities, and it is the job of leaders in each country to do rather than pandering to and exploiting sensationalism.

Liberal democracy, geographical proximity, affiliation to the US alliance network, and overlapping security interests are some of the logical rationales for a Japan-ROK partnership. Both countries play a vital role to facilitate each other's security capabilities. Further, diversification of their partnership to nontraditional security and even non-security areas would expand benefits to new groups in each country as well as to areas beyond Northeast Asia. Visions and efforts by Japan and the ROK toward these goals would set the definition of a "partnership for a new age."

For further reading on this subject, please refer to Issues & Insights, Vol. 13 No. 7 titled, "Hanging Together: Improving Deterrence Through ROK-Japan Cooperation" [<http://csis.org/publication/issues-insights-vol-13-no-7-hanging-together-improving-deterrence-through-rok-japan-coop>].

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.