

Necessity of Mini-Lateral Institutional Framework in the Asia-Pacific: A Korean Perspective

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Minilateral linkage of US-led alliances and China’s response

In the Asia-Pacific, the US has been operating the so-called “hub-and-spoke” alliance system centering on its alliances with Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea and Thailand. In contrast to US operation of the ‘hub-and-spoke’ system during the Cold War, the US has been strengthening ties among its individual alliances in the post-Cold War period. A typical example of US-led alliances becoming linked in a “mini-lateral” setting is the US-Japan-Australia trilateral security cooperation based on the US-Australia and the US-Japan alliances. The TSD began as the Trilateral *Security Dialogue* in 2001 with Australia’s initiation and was promoted to the level of a strategic dialogue in 2006. The three states have been adopting non-traditional security issues as the main agenda of the TSD and have been conducting joint military exercises. The TSD has been creating a closer linkage between the US-Japan and the US-Australia alliances, as a result of which the security relationship between Australia and Japan has been remarkably enhanced.

The US claims that creating connectivity between US-led alliances is one way to facilitate ‘minilateralism’ which is defined as “meetings between small subsets of nations, typically three or four, designed to address common security interests in a more focused setting” (U.S. Department of Defense 1998, 42). Minilateral *security* cooperation in the Asia-Pacific tends to refer to cooperation on broader non-traditional security issues, and aims to accumulate a practice of trust and experiences among participating states. It is characterized as ad-hoc, flexible and informal (Tow 2015, 24-26).

Given that multilateral security institutions have been under-developed in the Asia-Pacific region due to the political, economic, social, and cultural differences of the component states, the US expects the ‘mini-lateral’ linkage of individual alliances to serve as a stepping stone towards the creation of an effective multilateral security institution to deal with regional comprehensive security issues (Park 2011, 146). Or, it can be a part of a patchwork that threads between bilateralism and multilateralism (Cha 2011). The concepts of ‘expansive bilateralism’ (Job 1997, 162), ‘virtual alliance’ (Cossa 2000, 69-82), ‘enriched bilateralism’ (Blair and Handley 2001, 10-12), ‘convergent security’ (Tow 2001, 213-223), ‘mutual alliance’ (Tow and Acharya 2007, 27-37), ‘strategic Asian triangles’ (Green 2014, 760-761), and ‘contingent trilateralism’ (Tow 2008, 24; 2015, 28) all support this view.

However, China perceives US-led minilateral security cooperation as US-led minilateral *defense* cooperation with an intention of encircling China. Like bilateral military cooperation, minilateral military cooperation can develop around dealing with both defense and security issues. Mak defines security as “all-encompassing, to include both conventional as well as nonmilitary threats from within and without”, while defining defense as “essentially involves protecting the nation’s sovereignty, principally from external, conventional military threats” (Mak 2014, 128). Adopting his distinction between *security* and *defense*, minilateral *defense* cooperation is forged to aggregate participants’ military capabilities to defend against a specific (potential) threat. Because of its threat-centric nature, minilateral *defense* cooperation requires a high degree of shared threat perception and operational unity among participants.

Though the US maintains that minilateral linkage of the US-led alliances is a gradual but acceptable way to move toward multilateralism, China suspects that, ultimately, the US will likely form a small-scale Asia-Pacific version of NATO against China by expanding and connecting US-led minilateral military cooperation. From the Chinese perspective, the distinction between defense and security cooperation becomes murkier when security cooperation develops to the level of conducting joint military exercises. That is because states participating in minilateral security cooperation could deploy the trust and experiences accumulated from conducting military exercises for the purposes of responding to a specific threat, if they deemed it necessary. Or, they could disguise offensive or defensive military exercises as military exercises for non-traditional security issues. China claims that responding to non-traditional security issues has been serving as a ground for strengthening the US alliance network (Zhang 2014, 186). Unless such Chinese views are modified, the US-led minilateral security cooperation may fail to be fully developed in the region, especially when US-led bilateral alliances serve as a base for minilateral cooperation in the region.

South Korea’s position

The US has been attempting to link between the US-South Korea and the US-Japan alliances. Such an attempt traces back to Trilateral Coordination Oversight Group (TCOG), which was set up among the three states in 1997. The main rationale of the TCOG was that talks held by any of the three with North Korea should be done within the framework of their mutual agreement. First meeting in April 1999, the TCOG was convened officially eight times that year, six times in 2000, and four times in 2001. Each meeting - usually lasting two-and-a-half days - was quite casual with only several hours of formal sessions. Such a setting allowed participants to communicate in an atmosphere in which concerns could be raised and positions clarified at a more personal level than a more formal format would have allowed (Ehrhardt 2004/2005, 679-680). Independent observers have assessed the TCOG meetings as having been extremely beneficial to the management of the two alliances (Cossa and Oxley 2000, 66; Schoff 2005, v; Pritchard 2007, 178-180). Though it became more a consultation mechanism rather than one of actual policy coordination, the TCOG group continued to converse until mid-2003, when the Six Party Talks were launched (Mitchell 2002, 29).

As the case of the TCOG attests, the US, Japan and South Korea share the necessity of

closer trilateral coordination among them to respond to the North Korean military threat. For example, since 2008, the Defense Trilateral Talks (DTT) among the three states have been held regularly to discuss defense issues, including North Korea's WMD programs. Given the necessity, the US attempts to link between the US-Japan and the US-South Korea alliances. However, unlike the case of linking between the US-Japan and the US-Australia alliances, such attempts have been unsuccessful mainly due to the unresolved historical issues between the two states. A prime example is the failed attempt to induce South Korea and Japan to sign the GSOMIA. Despite the US push toward it, the South Korean government postponed its signing several hours before the scheduled time on June 29, 2012 in response to the backlash from the South Korean public. Embedded in raising procedural problems, which occurred in the South Korean government's push for the agreement, are broad public anti-Japanese sentiments. As of this writing, it remains unsigned. Though the three states signed an agreement to share military intelligence related to North Korea in December 2014, the South Korean government made it clear that it was not the same as the GSOMIA.

Nevertheless, the US continues to attempt to link between the two alliances. It has been putting effort into providing a venue for the three states to get together. Especially, the US has been arranging trilateral meetings within the context of coordinating the three states' stance on the resumption of the stalled Six Party Talks.

However, as the episode of the failed GSOMIA illustrates, as long as the nationalistic sentiments in Japan and South Korea continue, it is unlikely that the US attempts will bear the desired fruit. Moreover, since China perceives trilateral defense cooperation against North Korea as having an ulterior motive of containing China, the South Korean government has been reluctant to give the impression that South Korea fully accepts the US attempts to link the US-Japan and the US-South Korea alliances.

To note, the connection of the US-South Korea and the US-Japan alliances in the context of the TCOG had not been forged with the specific intent of countering Chinese influence in the region. Rather, by providing a venue for a more concerted voice among the three states, these gatherings intended to encourage China (which is the chair of the Six Party Talks) to take a more active role in facilitating the talks. In fact, China was not particularly opposed to the trilateral meetings. Given that Seoul was reluctant to discuss China-related matters in the meetings (Rozman 2007, 207), and the meetings did not undermine the actual framework of the Six Party Talks, China might have seen them as a useful conduit into the Six Party Talks through the agencies of South Korea and even Japan that supplemented its own meetings with the US (Schoff 2005, 32).

However, in the midst of the US strengthening its alliance network as a means of pursuing a strategy of 're-balancing to Asia', China would now view US attempts to link between the US-Japan and the US-South Korea alliances as minilateral *defense* cooperation against the rise of China (Zhang 2014, 179-187). In particular, China found it unpleasant that South Korea participated in the US-Japan military exercise that followed the 2010 conflict between China and Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. So did the US Forces Korea, having 150 US soldiers participating in the military exercises between Japan and the US in 2012. Even though the three states conduct military exercises under the name of *security*

cooperation on non-traditional issues, as in the cases of a search and rescue exercise in the East China Sea in 2013 and a counter-piracy naval exercise in the Gulf of Oman in 2014, China may not take it at face value. Thus, Channer points out that “[t]he more the US pushes Japan and South Korea closer through trilateral arrangements, the more Seoul will feel caught between China-US and China-Japan rivalries” (Channer 2014, 4).

Under such circumstances, South Korea is unlikely to fully support the idea of linking between the US-South Korea and the US-Japan alliances. It is in this context that Australia may assume a bridging role for facilitating US-led trilateral or quadrilateral security cooperation in Northeast Asia, taking advantage of its growing security relationship with South Korea along with the already strong ones it has with Japan and the US.

South Korea and the development of minilateralism in the region

It has been argued previously that Japan and Australia have remarkably enhanced their *security* cooperation on non-traditional issues in the context of the TSD, while the US attempt to induce South Korea and Japan to improve their *defense* cooperation has not been successful. That being said, it is noteworthy to examine the increasing security cooperation between South Korea and Australia, both allies of the US, as it could be a stepping stone toward trilateral or quadrilateral security cooperation involving both states and the US.

The two states set the framework for security cooperation in 2009 in the ‘Joint Statement on Enhanced Global and Security Cooperation’, which calls for expanding cooperation in the areas of joint military exercises, military information sharing, defense industries, and so on and so forth. In the spirit of the Joint Statement, the two states signed the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) in 2009 and ratified it in 2010. In the same year, Australia participated in the South Korea-led international investigation to validate South Korea’s claim that a North Korean torpedo sank a Korean naval vessel, the *Cheonan*. Throughout the investigation, Australia stood firm by South Korea, which sought to acquire a legitimation of its claim. The two states held their first joint maritime military exercise, *Haedori-Wallaby*, in May 2012.

Also, the two states held their first 2+2 in 2013 and the second one in 2015, which was the second 2+2 ministerial meeting South Korea had conducted with a foreign state, the first one having been with the US. For Australia, South Korea is the sixth state holding a 2+2 ministerial meeting, following the US, the UK, Japan, Singapore, and Indonesia. The two states have regularly been discussing security issues at political-military talks between senior foreign ministry and defence officials, Defence Policy Talks, Navy-to-Navy talks, and Air force-to-Air force talks (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2015).

The upward trend of increasing security cooperation between the two states was confirmed at the summit meeting between President Park and Prime Minister Abbott in April 2014. The two leaders issued a joint statement, termed a ‘vision statement on a secure, peaceful and prosperous future between the ROK and Australia’. The statement calls for strengthening cooperation in defense science, technology and defense industry as well as cooperation in non-military areas such as maritime security, humanitarian aid and disaster relief.

Then, one may speculate that successful Japan-Australia security cooperation and South Korea-Australia cooperation could lead to trilateral security cooperation among South Korea, Australia and Japan (Akutsu 2015, 277-278). Especially, according to Ungerer and Smith, the US encouraged South Korea and Australia to sign the afore-mentioned ‘Joint Statement on Enhanced Global and Security Cooperation’ in 2009 with the intention of facilitating cooperation among the two states and Japan (Unger and Smith 2010, 4 and 10). Here the concept of ‘trilateralism’ can be applied. Trilateralism is defined as “cooperative security behavior among three states or polities to promote specific values and preferred avenues to order building” (Tow 2015, 27).

However, as discussed before, the strained South Korea-Japan relations would not likely permit it. Rather, South Koreans may find it more comfortable to engage in quadrilateral security cooperation that includes the US rather than trilateral without the US, as attested to in the four states’ quadrilateral security cooperation under the framework of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) military exercises, which South Korea joined in 2009. Also, South Korea participated in the multi-national Air Force training exercise, Red Flag-Alaska, hosted by the US, in which Japan and Australia had already participated. South Korea also participated in the aerial Cope North exercise among the US, Japan and Australia in 2014 (after observing it in 2013). Upon these developments, Unger and Smith claim that they can “[build] the existing spokes of the San Francisco alliance system into a stronger quadrilateral framework” (Unger and Smith 2010, 15).

To note, non-traditional security issues have been driving joint military exercises between South Korea and Australia in the trilateral format with the US and in the quadrilateral one with the US and Japan. Yet, there is a possibility that South Korea’s (mis)impression that Australia has tilted toward China encirclement may work against it. Such a (mis)impression comes from the fact that Australia has been recently cooperating with the US deployment of the latter’s military assets on Australian soil (Park 2015). For example, the new US-Australia force posture agreement signed at the 2014 AUSMIN clearly states that American airman as well as US marines will be deployed in Darwin and Northern Australia on a rotational basis, and the two states will construct infrastructure for an expanding US Air Force presence. Juxtaposed with the agreement, there have been media reports that the US may use the Cocos Island for US drones and utilize naval facilities in Perth for US ships (Whitlock 2012; O’Malley and Welch 2012). Also, Australian media reported in August 2014 that “the United States is working to integrate Australian warships into its ballistic-missile defence systems in Northeast Asia” in order to construct a US MD system in the Asia-Pacific (Garnaut 2014).

That being said, Australia’s efforts to assuage such Chinese concerns would help modify South Korea’s (mis)impression. For example, as mentioned before, Australia invited China to join military exercises with the US, the Kowari-2014 held in October 2014. Ten soldiers from each state were trained in Australia’s Northern Territory. It marked the first time for Chinese soldiers to be trained with their Australian and US counterparts in Australian territory. Such efforts could have an indirect impact on the enhancement of security cooperation between South Korea and Australia in trilateral and quadrilateral settings.

On the other hand, South Korea is well aware that minilateral linkage only among the US and its allies is susceptible to China's strong criticism. South Korea's first *National Security Strategy* published in 2014 states that South Korea "seeks to nurture an environment conducive to the further building of trust and expansion of security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region through mini-lateral strategic talks among Korea, the U.S., and China, as well as among Korea, the U.S., Japan and Australia" (Republic of Korea's Office of National Security 2014, 98). What the statement implies is that South Korea hopes to develop minilateral security cooperation that includes China as well as the US.

For example, South Korea has been working to resuscitate the stalled trilateral summit among Japan, South Korea and China. Since the leaders of the three states agreed to enhance cooperation among themselves on the side lines of ASEAN+3 meetings in 1999, their cooperation has been institutionalized to the extent that the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) was set up in Seoul in 2011. The three states have "more than 50 trilateral consultative mechanisms including 18 Ministerial meetings and over 100 cooperative projects" (TCS 2015). In particular, ministerial talks on environmental issues have been taking place for more than 10 years. However, the trilateral summit has been stalled since the fifth meeting in 2012 due to nationalistic sentiments and historical animosity rampant in the three states. That being said, despite South Korea's continuing reluctance to hold a bilateral summit meeting with Japan, South Korea proposed to resume the trilateral summit in November 2014 and in September 2015. As such, the more South Korea and Australia engage with China in minilateral settings, the less China would perceive minilateral *security* cooperation among South Korea, Australia and the US as minilateral *defense* cooperation against the rise of China. Therefore, in order to strengthen US-led minilateral *security* cooperation, both South Korea and Australia should also promote China-inclusive minilateral security cooperation.

The most influential minilateralism in which South Korea should engage itself would be the one among South Korea, the US, and China. Whether the US and China can accumulate practices of cooperation and build trust would be decisive in the stability of the region. South Korea officially proposed it and held a 1.5 track workshop among the three states on 27th-28th of June 2013.

Yet, trilateralism among South Korea, the US and China should not be designed to cover North Korean nuclear problems. Otherwise, China would not participate in it. This is not to say that China would be opposed to trilateral talks among South Korea, the US and China to discuss North Korean nuclear issues. Such informal gatherings within the framework of the Six Party talks are not against China's interests. What China worries about is an institutionalized trilateralism that covers North Korean nuclear issues which would overlap with the Six Party talks. Therefore, a regularized trilateralism should be confined only to having non-traditional security issues on its agenda.

Ultimately, South Korea should attempt to link South Korea-US-China trilateralism with the South Korea-US-Japan one under the name of responding to non-traditional security issues. Also, if trilateralism among South Korea, the US and China becomes activated, it should be expanded to invite more members. Through these processes, minilateralism in the region can gain momentum toward its success.

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