

CHAPTER IX

Trilateral Relations and the
Korean Peninsula

Scott Snyder

THE KOREAN PENINSULA has historically been a battleground, both in terms of influence and military conflict, among major powers in Asia, the vortex of political confrontation and competition for great power dominance from the end of the nineteenth century through the cold war. Each of the major powers involved on the Korean peninsula has a mixed historical legacy too fresh to be easily forgotten or fully overcome, and this unresolved legacy forms the basis for concern over the possible reemergence of a major power conflict in Northeast Asia today.

Ironically, under current circumstances each of the Korean peninsula's Pacific Rim neighbors finds to varying degrees that their respective short-term interests coincide in favor of maintaining a division between North and South Korea (or at least a gradual process of convergence between the two) and that the sudden reunification of Korea could, many fear, reignite tensions among the major powers in Northeast Asia. Indeed, positive China-U.S. relations—and, to a lesser degree, cooperative Sino-Japanese relations—are widely believed to be prerequisites for progress between the two Koreas. However, the status quo between North and South Korea is increasingly unsustainable despite the major powers' interest in a

stabilized Korean peninsula, leaving open the possibility that renewed conflicts could develop accidentally in response to any sudden Korean reunification.

Although the shared short-term emphasis on stability by the major powers provides a basis for regional cooperation on Korean issues, their long-term views of the role and significance of the Korean peninsula may not coincide. This may lead to potential competition for influence on the Korean peninsula between China and the United States and between China and Japan. China, Japan, and the United States (and, to a lesser extent, Russia) have begun to hedge their bets in consideration of long-term interests, leading to the emergence of both new forms of cooperation and precursors of competition affecting the Korean peninsula. In addition, the strategic alignments and interests of a reunified Korea itself will be critical factors in determining the balance of power in Northeast Asia in the twenty-first century.

TRILATERAL SHORT-TERM COOPERATION TOWARD THE KOREAN PENINSULA

The short-term interests of China, Japan, and the United States toward the Korean peninsula have crystallized in recent years around three “no’s”: no war, no nuclear weapons development on the Korean peninsula, and no collapse of North Korea (the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea). Limited forms of cooperation have emerged in support of these three policy objectives following the end of the cold war. For instance, with the normalization of relations between China and South Korea (the Republic of Korea) in 1992, Beijing first developed a policy of equal distance between the two Koreas, with an increasing emphasis on maintaining stability as a fundamental objective. China’s support for continuing the Military Armistice Commission at Panmunjom, despite North Korean attempts to undermine it, and China’s constructive role in the Four-Party Talks, which were designed to bring a lasting peace to the Korean peninsula, are two examples of Beijing’s emphasis on stability as a priority over equidistance. This focus has brought China, the United States, and South

Korea into greater tactical alignment in response to any possible North Korean act of aggression. Japan has also been playing a supporting role through the strengthening of the Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation to provide enhanced Japanese logistical support for U.S. troops in South Korea in the event of an outbreak of hostilities.

The emergence of the North Korean nuclear threat as a focus of global attention in 1993 and 1994 required new forms of cooperation involving China, Japan, the United States, and South Korea to counter North Korean actions. The initial limits of regional cooperation were clearly demonstrated by the inability of the United States to garner support for a sanctions drive against North Korea at the United Nations in 1993. However, negotiations between the United States and North Korea (as endorsed by the UN Security Council) to resolve international concerns about the North Korean nuclear weapons program required unprecedented diplomatic coordination to support both the outcome of the negotiations and the implementation of a long-term solution, as embodied by the North Korea-U.S. Geneva Agreed Framework of 1994.

Most notably, the negotiation process led to the establishment of a periodic trilateral diplomatic dialogue among Japan, the United States, and South Korea. In addition, implementation of the terms of the Agreed Framework through construction of proliferation-resistant light-water reactors in North Korea resulted in the establishment of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), an international organization led by Japan, the United States, South Korea, and the European Union. Although China has been unwilling to officially join KEDO, Beijing has clearly indicated its support for the aims of KEDO and has demonstrated directly to Pyongyang its concerns regarding North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Indeed, China's support has widely been regarded as a critical prerequisite for the successful conclusion of North Korea-U.S. negotiations in Geneva. (Close cooperation within KEDO has also resulted in certain strains, most notably recent conflicts over funding of the project among Japan, the United States, and South Korea.)

As another example of cooperation, the international community

has provided food aid to North Korea, in part to forestall potential refugee flows. However, regional coordination mechanisms in response to a possible collapse of the North Korean state remain limited. The international community, led by the United States, has responded to North Korea's humanitarian crisis through the UN World Food Program (WFP) by providing food aid, both out of a desire to lessen the risk of political instability in North Korea and for humanitarian reasons. China has acted independently of the international community, but it has been North Korea's largest food donor, primarily for security reasons—to prevent refugees from spilling over into Chinese provinces bordering North Korea. The United States has been one of the largest donors to the WFP, which launched its largest appeal ever in 1997, raising US\$415 million to allay North Korea's food crisis. Japan, for domestic political reasons, has not made a significant contribution, despite holding large stockpiles of aging grain. Contingency planning for the possibility of a North Korean collapse has been initiated by Japan, the United States, and South Korea.

Policy coordination activities by China, Japan, and the United States in response to overlapping short-term interests in favor of maintaining stability on the Korean peninsula suggest that such efforts are partial and ad hoc rather than comprehensive and institutionalized. There is still no official subregional dialogue mechanism devoted primarily to security in Northeast Asia; KEDO offers the best example of concrete cooperation in pursuit of a clearly defined, practical objective. Notable discrepancies in short-term responses to North Korea's challenge include China's unwillingness to formally join KEDO, the major instrument for cooperation to attain non-proliferation objectives on the Korean peninsula, and Japan's unwillingness to contribute food aid to North Korea as part of the international humanitarian aid effort because of its own domestic political constraints. (Negative public opinion in Japan over alleged North Korean kidnappings of Japanese nationals in the 1960s and 1970s has made it more difficult to reach consensus in Japan on any policy initiative toward North Korea.) For the United States, the major policy challenge is to maintain effective policy coordination among Japan, South Korea, and the United States to pursue joint policies despite a differing order of priorities while also continuing

to reach out to China for additional support in coaxing North Korea toward greater engagement with the outside world.

LONG-TERM VIEWS ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA

Despite the development of limited cooperation among China, Japan, and the United States on Korea-related issues resulting from shared short-term interests in stability, differing long-term strategic interests toward the Korea peninsula may lead to future competition as each of the three countries seeks to extend its influence on the Korean peninsula. China and Japan have overlapping but conflicting security interests on the Korean peninsula because of uncertainty as to whether the Koreas are a security buffer or a security threat, depending on the quality of their respective bilateral relations with Korean leaders. The U.S. interest on the Korean peninsula stems from global interests in the maintenance of security and stability in a conflict-prone region and from a healthy economic relationship with South Korea. However, a continuing U.S. presence in post-reunification Korea may be perceived negatively by a rising China with its own version of a Monroe Doctrine for former tributary states and near neighbors. Thus, the future orientation of Korea as a neutral party or as a nation that tilts toward China, Japan, or the United States will be perceived as a key factor in determining the long-term security environment in the region. As it has become clear that Seoul is more likely than Pyongyang to shape the future orientation of a reunified Korea, the emphasis placed by neighboring governments, including Beijing, on establishing strong relationships with the Korean leadership in Seoul has shifted accordingly.

The challenge for the United States is how to retain influence on the Korean peninsula while managing a peaceful transition to a unified and democratic Korea. Such a policy requires an emphasis on maintaining strong South Korea-U.S. relations and on supporting South Korean efforts to reduce inter-Korean tensions. To the extent that Seoul is willing to engage in an accommodating policy that supports North Korea's integration with the outside world, the United States should support such an effort, developing relations with Pyongyang in tandem with improvements in inter-Korean relations. The

U.S. role in helping to reduce tensions on the Korean peninsula is indispensable, particularly given the fact that, although limited, the United States may have more potential influence in Pyongyang than any other government. Nevertheless, U.S. influence in Pyongyang is most effective when implemented with Seoul in the lead.

The United States must lead the international community in support of Seoul's attempts to conduct a generous, inclusive policy toward North Korea, without being seen as either obstructionist or irrelevant. In other words, the key to sustaining U.S. objectives and influence on the Korean peninsula is to maintain strong security relations with Seoul, without taking an overbearing approach, up to and even after Korean reunification. Such an approach requires careful management of sensitive Japan-Korea relations. The United States should avoid any action that suggests to Koreans that Tokyo is a more important partner than Seoul and should encourage the harmonization of objectives and functions of the Japan-U.S. and South Korea-U.S. security alliances as basic to regional stability.

China's efforts to support near-term stability on the Korean peninsula are entirely consistent with its long-term objectives of maintaining a security buffer on its border and increasing China's economic and political influence in both Koreas. Although some Chinese scholars now predict that North Korea's collapse is inevitable, a policy that seeks to delay North Korea's disintegration and subsequent Korean reunification through provision of food aid while expanding China's economic and political influence in Pyongyang and Seoul serves China's near-term security interests. This includes nurturing trade and economic relations with Seoul, although the rapid growth of this relationship has suffered in the fallout from the Asian financial crisis.

China's sensitivity to the dominant U.S. role on the Korean peninsula is a factor inhibiting long-term China-U.S. cooperation on Korean issues. Any outcome on the Korean peninsula that appears to expand U.S. influence in the region will not be welcome in Beijing. However, although Chinese policymakers may prefer that U.S. troops leave the Korean peninsula after reunification, China's ability to influence such an event under current circumstances remains circumscribed; it is not in a position to veto the perpetuation of a long-standing security relationship with the United States if the leadership of a reunified Korea so chooses. In the end, the only viable

Chinese strategy for reducing U.S. influence on the Korean peninsula is to gain as much economic and political influence as possible in Seoul in an attempt to convince Seoul to choose Beijing over Washington.

Japan's long-term political influence on the Korean peninsula appears to be the weakest and most indirect among Korea's Pacific Rim neighbors, although Japan will remain an indispensable economic partner for Korea's reconstruction, and improvements in South Korea-Japan military cooperation demonstrate pragmatic and guarded willingness to cooperate despite past differences. A major security concern will be the maintenance of a good relationship between Japan and Korea. Recent disputes over maritime sovereignty and fishing rights are indications that Japanese-Korean relations may become more troubled as the inter-Korean confrontation subsides or following Korea's reunification. Such friction could diminish Japan's political influence on the Korean peninsula, although strong economic ties may help to dampen political tensions. The strengthening of U.S. security relationships with Tokyo and Seoul is another factor that could temper such tensions by reinforcing the recent trend toward military exchange and cooperation between Japan and South Korea. The difficulty for Japan's leaders will be how to gain political credit for its economic contributions toward Korea's reconstruction without being perceived as competing with China for economic or political influence.

Given these opportunities for both cooperation and confrontation, the choices made on the Korean peninsula will play an important role in defining the future nature of security relations in Northeast Asia among China, Japan, and the United States. Ironically, the prospects for trilateral cooperation on Korean issues are greater whereas the prospects for a reunified Korea remain dim, but as the likelihood of Korean reunification grows, competition among Korea's neighbors for influence over the process will likely increase. As occurred at the end of the nineteenth century, a unified Korea may again be the vortex for great power competition in Northeast Asia. But this time, the choices made by the Korean government—even if it is preoccupied with problems of internal reconstruction and reintegration—may also influence the future direction of international relations in the region. Although there is no guarantee that the Korean-U.S. security

relationship will be extended, the most likely Korean choice will be to seek assistance from its least threatening, most distant ally—a partner able to provide balance in a complex regional environment and defend against the potential threat of near neighbors. However, Korean public attitudes, Congressional views of the U.S. troop presence in Asia, China's posture, and the level of tensions in Japan-Korea relations will all have a bearing on Korea's tactical choices, as Korea engages in a familiar historical gambit of playing off big powers against each other to perpetuate its survival and influence on its own terms.