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A CASE FOR A COMMON JAPAN-ROK STRATEGIC VISION

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Japan-ROK security cooperation goes nowhere when populism overcomes pragmatism. With the failure to conclude GSOMIA and ACSA earlier this year, the defense community inside and outside the Japanese and South Korean governments must be greatly disappointed. On the other hand, there is some hope for the future. Japan-ROK security cooperation, which has its origin in the first Korean nuclear crisis of 1994, has expanded enough to envision the conclusion of GSOMIA and ACSA by 2012. After so many complications, hardly anyone could have expected the relationship would come this far 20 or even 10 years ago.

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The unpredictability of the new North Korean regime and the rapid military buildup of China do not reduce but rather increase the objective necessity of Japan-ROK security cooperation. It is time to return to pragmatism over populism.


What can be done? Japan and the ROK have been conducting maritime search and rescue training since 1999 in accordance with the 1998 joint declaration “A New Japan-Republic of Korea Partnership towards the Twenty-first Century.” After President Lee Myung-bak assumed office, the two governments announced the Statement of Intent on Defense Exchanges in April 2009 and, based on the existing exchanges, agreed on future cooperation in high-level, working-level, and military unit-to-unit exchanges, regular joint search and rescue exercises, international peace cooperation activities, international emergency relief activities, humanitarian reconstruction assistance activities, and so on. In January 2011, the two governments reached an agreement on holding regular defense minister and vice-defense minister meetings, deepening discussion on ACSA, and exchanging views on GSOMIA. Government officials of the two countries will discuss the details of those agreements. Are there any other things to be done?

What the two countries should do is to go back to the basics—to establish a common understanding of the future security landscape of the Asia-Pacific region in order to begin steady and objective discussions on a common strategic vision—rather than repeat deliberations on specific areas of cooperation. Sixteen years have already passed since Professor Yoon Dok-min’s proposal “It’s time to think about ROK-Japan security cooperation” attracted a lot of attention in Japan in 1996. Meanwhile, the exacerbated North Korean nuclear and missile problems and China’s growing military power have been changing the geopolitics in Northeast Asia. Now that the United States is adopting a rebalancing strategy, the geopolitical dynamism in the Asia-Pacific is gaining impetus. In the late 1990s, Japan’s security cooperation with the ROK was expected to develop deeper than with any other liberal democratic country besides the United States. However, Japan developed firm security relations with Australia after 2000, which resulted in the promotion of Japan-US-Australia trilateral security cooperation. This fact is a

reminder of the expectation that Japan-ROK security cooperation would further advance Japan-US-ROK cooperation.

If they can share a strategic vision, Japan and the ROK will be able to adopt common strategic objectives and even a new concrete action plan. Building such a strategic vision is not a monopoly of the Track I framework. On the contrary, Track 1.5 frameworks are more appropriate for free and flexible discussions on a variety of topics. The following items can be discussed under such frameworks:

1. Scenarios for the changing geopolitics in Northeast Asia, focusing on the rise of Chinese military power, and their outcomes;
2. Scenarios for the future of the new North Korean regime;
3. Connections between the Japan-US alliance and the ROK-US alliance under the umbrella of Japan-US-ROK security cooperation;
4. Japan-ROK security cooperation in areas beyond Northeast Asia;
5. Cooperation with China, Russia, and North Korea outside the Six-Party Talks;
6. Japan-China-ROK and Japan-US-ROK security cooperation; and
7. Japan-ROK-Australia and Japan-US-ROK-Australia security cooperation.

If they can develop a common strategic vision and adopt strategic objectives and action plans, Japan and the ROK can take the lead in ensuring the stability of Northeast Asia and then contribute to building a security order. The priority is building a common strategic vision. The geopolitical dynamism of Asia will leave Japan and the ROK behind as long as those two countries hesitate to cooperate. For now, the intellectuals and experts concerned from both sides should urgently gather to discuss how to improve the bilateral relationship victimized by populism. 

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