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TRACING THE IMPACTS OF KOREA'S ENGAGEMENTS AROUND THE WORLD

Korea-India-U.S. Strategic Engagement

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The U.S. pivot to Asia is emerging as one of the organizing principles for Washington's future foreign policy as it views its own economic destiny becoming increasingly intertwined with the Indo-Pacific. The recent ratification of the Republic of Korea-US Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) by both sides and President Obama's announcement in November 2009 to participate in Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations indicate a clear American desire to economically partner with dynamic economies in the Asia-Pacific and Oceania.

However, while the Asia-Pacific holds much economic promise, it also presents a range of strategic challenges that have the potential to upset the region's collective ability to foster peace and prosperity. These challenges include a nuclear-armed North Korea, China's growing military power combined with its ambiguous strategic aims, maintaining the free flow of commerce and energy to Asia's growing economies, maritime disputes in the South China Sea, and the emergence of transnational threats such as piracy, terrorism, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Against this strategic backdrop, the U.S. has been actively renewing existing alliances and partnerships as well as building new ones. As the United States winds down its commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq and pivots towards Asia, the U.S. will increasingly focus on participating in the development of a security architecture that can effectively deal with stability in the Asia-Pacific and the wider Indian Ocean region.

A key element of Washington's approach to Asia has been the development of its bilateral partnership with India. The conventional wisdom in Washington as well as in Asia has been that India's rise will eventually emerge as a decisive factor in promoting stability and security in the Indian Ocean region as well as Asia. The Pentagon's strategic guidance document issued in January of this year, envisioned a future role for India as a "provider of security in the broader Indian Ocean region" while long standing allies such as South Korea, Japan, and Australia went unmentioned.[1] Washington has invested a substantial amount of political and diplomatic capital to assist India's rise as a global power. In 2008, the two sides completed the civil nuclear deal which led to a major paradigm shift in bilateral ties after decades of estrangement between the U.S. and India during the Cold War. The Obama Administration continued progress in bilateral ties by expressing public support for India's goal to obtain a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, as well as reforming technology transfer policies to India.

Defense relations have also been on an upward trajectory since 2005 when the U.S. and India signed a ten-year agreement on defense cooperation that outlined a range of areas for bilateral engagement. Since then, the U.S. has sold billions of dollars in defense equipment to include cargo aircraft (Lockheed Martin C-130J), maritime surveillance platforms (Boeing P-8I), and the amphibious landing dock ship USS Trenton (renamed INS Jalashwa). India also now conducts more exercises with the U.S. than with any other country. The remarkable increase in defense engagement has not gone unnoticed by Beijing which has increasingly became antagonistic towards New Delhi in its bilateral interactions with visa denials to senior Indian military officials, a growing reluctance to resolve border disputes, and reaffirming ties with India's rival Pakistan.

Although defense and economic cooperation has deepened to unprecedented levels, the relationship has recently entered a period of slower growth with both sides consumed by domestic politics, alternate foreign policy priorities, and growing friction over policy positions on issues such as Libya, Syria, and Iran. India's decision to not select an American entrant in the Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft (MMRCA) competition also caused some American government and industry officials to question Indian commitment to the bilateral relationship.

Some of these recent difficulties can be attributed to India's policy of strategic autonomy in which India eschews excessively close relations with any single power. For India, strategic autonomy provides it with the maximum amount of flexibility and space to take decisions based, first, on India's interests and secondly, on the merits of a particular issue. What will be interesting to see is whether India will be able to maintain this policy as its political, economic, diplomatic, and military power expands in the coming years and expectations grow from the international community

for greater Indian leadership. For the short to mid-term, it appears strategic autonomy and non-interference in the affairs of other nations will be the guiding principles of Indian foreign policy.

Aside from India's strategic autonomy, there is still a residual trust deficit that exists between New Delhi and Washington lingering from the Cold War and the more recent Indian nuclear tests of May 1998. India has been subject to American sanctions on a number of occasions to include the 1965 India-Pakistan War, after the 1974 Peaceful Nuclear Explosion, and after the 1998 nuclear tests. For some in the Indian government, American reliability is still an open question.

Finally, despite the lofty rhetoric of converging interests between both governments, the U.S. and India have different visions of the relationship. The U.S. would like to work closely with India on issues of common strategic interest to include Iran, maritime security, and trade, but the fact remains there has been little progress since President Obama's visit in November 2010 on implementing the various elements of the Obama-Singh joint statement. India's objectives for the relationship, by contrast, are much more limited and focused on seeking the best technology for the development of its economy and the indigenization of its military industry. Given its past history of sanctions, India has an ambition to provide for its own defense equipment and prevent future dependence on foreign technology suppliers.

Despite these challenges and setbacks, the U.S. and India need to take the long view of their bilateral relations. As Secretary Clinton said in her notable *Foreign Policy* article in November 2011, "...the United States is making a strategic bet on India's future—that India's greater role on the world stage will enhance peace and security...."[2] A decade ago, no one could have imagined the U.S. and India would have made the sort of remarkable progress they have made to date. The trajectory of bilateral ties is upward even if there are setbacks from time to time.

Against this backdrop of the American pivot to Asia and growing U.S.-India ties, there is also the dynamic of deepening India-Korea relations, which has witnessed impressive growth across a number of sectors to include trade, bilateral investment, maritime security, and technical defense cooperation. The fact that Prime Minister Singh's March 2012 visit came barely fifteen months after his first one indicates the growing importance of South Korea to India's foreign policy approach in Asia.[3] The deepening of bilateral relations can be attributed in part to President Lee's vision to have South Korea play a larger international role that extends far beyond Northeast Asia. New Delhi politically sees great benefit to deepening a partnership in Beijing's immediate neighborhood that could yield defense and nuclear technology along with greater trade opportunities. Despite the domestic political turbulence faced by both governments, New Delhi and Seoul have managed to maintain focus on deepening bilateral relations.

Beyond the existing and growing bilateral ties among the U.S., India and South Korea, there is an emerging set of strategic interests that is common to all three countries which would benefit from closer coordination and consultation. Closer cooperation among these three democracies could lead to more creative solutions which are rooted in common values and strategic outlook, and are unencumbered by tedious multilateral institutions. To begin with, all three have concerns about North Korea's stability and behavior. The U.S. and Korea have long-standing concerns about North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programs, along with Pyongyang's unpredictable behavior. India has concerns about North Korea's past record of missile proliferation to its rival Pakistan and has an interest in ensuring North Korea's nuclear program is contained.

Second, all three have an interest in promoting Indian Ocean security to secure key commerce and energy routes. Seoul and New Delhi rely heavily on energy resources from the Middle East. According to various estimates, India acquires 73% of its oil from the region[4] while South Korea acquires 87%.[5] Such high proportions of oil imports make Middle East stability and Indian Ocean maritime security increasingly high priorities for both countries. Furthermore, the increase in piracy incidents off the Horn of Africa have led to Indian and South Korean, along with American, naval assets to engage in counter-piracy patrols.

Third, all three countries have concerns about China's growing military power and Beijing's lack of transparency about its strategic aims. China has been active in building its military capacity and has recently engaged in provocative behavior in the South China Sea, leading the U.S. to reiterate its position on freedom of navigation through the maritime region.[6] India has concerns about China's burgeoning road infrastructure along the Sino-Indian border and Beijing's growing influence around the Indian Ocean littoral as it deepens its bilateral relations with Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Burma, and Bangladesh. South Korea has been frustrated by China's reluctance to pressure North Korea into changing its behavior or holding it accountable for incidents such as the sinking of the Cheonan.[7] It also has concerns about the implications of China's growing military power on the regional power structure.[8] Taken together, the three sides have much to discuss about how to effectively and productively deal with a rising China.

Fourth, all three sides have concerns about a range of global security issues to include Afghanistan and Pakistan. The U.S. and South Korea both have had troops deployed to Afghanistan. Seoul's initial deployment to Afghanistan after 9/11 was largely driven by its solidarity with its American ally and a need to contribute something to the Alliance. This attitude appeared to change, however, in the run-up to South Korea's second Afghan deployment when the Lee government viewed the deployment in Korea's own interest rather than as a favor to the Alliance.[9] Along with the U.S. and South Korea, India has long-standing concerns about Afghanistan's stability after the future U.S. withdrawal of most of its combat troops after 2014. New Delhi has a range of interests in Afghanistan and is particularly concerned about how Pakistan's behavior in Afghanistan will affect those interests. How India and Pakistan interact within Afghanistan after 2014 will have a significant impact on Afghanistan's future stability.

While the alignment of interests points to a natural fit for a trilateral arrangement, a few points should be noted before establishing such a forum. First, there are a number of existing multilateral structures that dominate the security architecture landscape in Asia. The numerous Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) dialogues along with the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum are significant bodies that require a significant amount of dedicated resources. The proliferation of "mini-lats" in Asia such as US-India-Japan, US-Japan-Australia, US-Japan-South Korea, and perhaps others in the offing may lead one to wonder whether at some point there will be diminishing returns from so many multilateral forums. As Evan Feigenbaum, a noted Asia analyst noted, "Is there any functional purpose to all this redundant and overlapping geometry?"[10]

Informal multilateral forums are most effective when they quickly assemble during a crisis and consist of countries that have proven capacity to contribute something to a common effort. The Tsunami Core Group of 2004 consisted of four countries to include the U.S., India, Japan, and Australia which closely coordinated efforts after a horrific natural disaster. There was no formal bureaucratic structure, no statements issued, and the structure was eventually dismantled once its mission was completed.[11] Despite the mystique of the "quad" which lived on for some time afterwards, this arrangement was a good example of an informal grouping comprised of capable, like-minded democratic states, focused on a common crisis.

Aside from the large number of existing trilateral mechanisms, there are other challenges that confront the establishment of such a grouping. To begin with, the limited capacity of the various governments is a serious issue that must be taken into account. For example, the size of the Indian Foreign Service is about 800 diplomats serving in 162 missions and posts around the world. Tiny Singapore by comparison has 847 foreign service officers.[12] Clearly, there is limited capacity within the Indian bureaucracy to staff its myriad bilateral and multilateral commitments, let alone put forth bureaucratic energy towards making a trilateral arrangement effective. New Delhi will also carefully consider Beijing's reaction before getting involved in another trilateral arrangement. The regional optic of three powerful Asian countries meeting could give China the impression of a containment effort which New Delhi wants to avoid. Furthermore, the leftists within India's political system may not look favorably upon India partnering with capitalist powers to contain China.

Despite the challenges, there are some areas where all three countries could productively collaborate. For example, trilateral cooperation among the U.S., India, and South Korea to develop India's infrastructure such as roads, ports, and basic services would facilitate business investment. India is also seeking to develop its shipping industry to provide for its growing navy and merchant shipping fleet. Korean shipyards could be helpful in assisting Indian shipyards develop their own capacity. Closer consultations among the three sides on regional and global security issues such as China, North Korea, Afghanistan, and Indian Ocean security could be useful for exchanging perspectives and coordinating positions. The three sides could also look at greater technical collaboration on green technology, automobile innovation, or aviation. Finally, defense collaboration through maritime cooperation, military exchanges and dialogues could be a prominent symbol of trilateral cooperation and promote habits of cooperation among the three militaries that could be useful during a time of crisis.

As the U.S., South Korea, and India grapple with rapidly changing strategic dynamics in Asia, there is much benefit to having close coordination among these three vibrant democracies. However, all three sides should be wary of establishing another trilateral mechanism without first thinking about the concrete purposes of such a grouping. Instead of establishing a formal grouping, it might be more beneficial to have informal coordination and consultation that could be done on the margins of Asia's various multilateral meetings or at other multilateral venues such as the annual IISS Asia Security Dialogue, the G-20 or the UN General Assembly. Doing so would accomplish the purposes of closer multilateral consultation without burdening the respective bureaucracies with another trilateral grouping.

> "Closer Cooperation Among These Three Democracies Could Lead to More Creative Solutions Which are Rooted in Common Values and Strategic Outlook, and are Unencumbered by Tedious Multilateral Institutions."

As the U.S. begins to execute its pivot in the coming years, it will do so while it grapples with a dismal economic situation at home. The U.S. will continue to be a decisive power in Asia for many years to come, but it will also seek capable partners that are able to consistently contribute to the promotion of stability in Asia. While there is no physical geographic connection among these three countries, they could increasingly be pushed together in the coming years through a confluence of interests that includes greater trade relations, a desire for stability, and the free flow of commerce and energy that ultimately leads to a more prosperous and stable Asia.

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