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A NEW ERA FOR JAPAN-ROK RELATIONS

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On February 25, Lee Myung-bak was sworn in as the Republic of Korea's 17th president. So far, Japan-ROK relations are expected to improve further under his administration. Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda and Mr. Lee have already agreed to resume shuttle diplomacy, revive trilateral talks among Tokyo, Seoul and Washington, and promote negotiations on a free trade agreement (FTA). All this points to the two leaders' determination to improve and strengthen the bilateral relationship. A major challenge ahead is how to steer this new momentum into efforts to build an effective security cooperation mechanism.

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New Foreign Policy Orientation

Although the official foreign and security policy of the Lee administration has yet to be announced, the new president has apparently made it a rule to adopt a “pragmatic,” not an ideological, foreign policy and aim at realistic, mutually beneficial diplomacy. The new president has given top priority to developing relations with the US into a “future-oriented” partnership. Mr. Lee has already pledged to renegotiate the contentious transfer to Seoul of wartime operation control (OPCON) and accelerate cooperation with Washington toward the ratification of the US-ROK FTA. The Foreign Minister-designate, Yu Myung-hwan, already suggested the possibility of South Korea’s more active role in the US-led Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). It is also said that joining the missile defense initiative is being discussed among Mr. Lee’s key advisors.

Strengthening relations with Japan is considered the next priority. The new president is hoping to revive the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) formed among Japan, South Korea and the US, reopen FTA negotiations and resume shuttle diplomacy. At the same time, he understands the sensitivities surrounding the longstanding territorial dispute over the island of Takeshima (or Dokdo in Korean) and history issues, and seems determined not to let these issues jeopardize improving relations with Tokyo.

Mr. Lee has also aimed at maintaining and strengthening relations with China and Russia by focusing on economic and security aspects, while taking heed that the proposed Japan-ROK-US cooperation does not hamper Seoul’s relations with these two countries.

Finally, in regard to the relationship with North Korea, Mr. Lee has promised since his election campaign to help the country raise its per capita income to \$3,000 over the next ten years on the condition that Pyongyang give up its nuclear programs under his “Denuclearization and Opening 3000 Initiative.” Mr. Lee also plans to provide \$40 billion in aid to Pyongyang as part of his five North Korea

projects, for which he is reportedly expecting Japan to shoulder \$10 billion.

How the new Lee administration manages these various relationships – especially striking a balance between its relations with Japan and the US and those with Russia and China, as well as its relations with Japan and the US and those with North Korea – remains to be seen.

Strengthening Security Cooperation

Japan-ROK security cooperation has taken bilateral, trilateral (including the US) and multilateral forms, and has been realized in various activities, such as international peace activities, measures to cope with North Korea, and confidence-building and crisis management.

Japan and South Korea should build on this experience in strengthening their ties. New options include: South Korea's participation in the PSI; the resumption of joint maritime training; joint operations in UN-sanctioned peacekeeping activities; strengthening of the TCOG mechanism; and establishment of a high-level security consultation committee involving the foreign and defense ministers (similar to the Japan-US “2 plus 2” meeting) for ROK-Japan and ROK-US relations respectively. As for joint peacekeeping activities, Tokyo and Seoul already have a shared experience in East Timor when the latter was under the administration of President Kim Dae-jung.

Mr. Lee has stated that he hopes to build “future-oriented” relations not only with the US, but also with Japan. It may be too early to judge his foreign policy toward Japan, but his pragmatic, future-oriented diplomatic stance will surely have a positive impact on future bilateral relations. Tokyo should seize this momentum to further develop security cooperation with Seoul.

Given that security concerns over North Korea are the most urgent common agenda items for Japan and South Korea, strengthening ties within the TCOG, which is expected to be resumed in the near future, would be a good start.

Strengthening Japan-ROK security ties should be a welcome move for the US as well. If Tokyo and Seoul can work closely with Washington, the trilateral relationship will grow even more solid. 

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