

Beyond Security: South Korea's Rejection Towards Us Initiative of Trilateralism

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ABSTRACT

This article is a study of foreign policy that aims to understand the reasons for South Korea's refusal to join the trilateral military alliance with the U.S. and Japan in countering North Korea's nuclear and missile provocation. Due to the crisis of the two Koreas and the North keeps doing any efforts that leads to escalate the conflict, the U.S. initiated trilateral military alliance with its allies, namely South Korea and Japan. Surprisingly, South Korea stated that they do not want to join trilateral military alliance with U.S. and Japan. Using an extensive literature review method with an interpretive approach, it finds that South Korea's domestic political condition and a high pressure from China regarding this issue were influential in South Korea's decision to refuse to join the alliance. The domestic political condition refers not only to political leader, but also to historical burden, and the changing generational priorities. This study also shows that China has got a stronger bargaining position in international relations in the East Asia region.

INTRODUCTION

Foreign policy is always devoted to achieving national interests. Regarding the Realist perspective, international affairs must be considered with national security as a requirement for a nation-state to be called a sovereign country. Without security, it will be difficult for a country to govern effectively (Griffiths, Callaghan, & Roach, 2008). Therefore, every nation state tries to create security for itself, including the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea).

After the ceasefire that marked the separation of the two Koreas in 1953, there was no significant improvement in the Two Koreas relations. These two countries are still in conflict with each other. For South Korea, North Korea poses a major security threat with its nuclear weapons. This threat not only affects South Korea, but also Japan as the two main allies of the United States (US).

Disturbed by the ongoing nuclear threat carried out by North Korea, the U.S. has proposed a plan to formalize and institutionalize a military cooperation with South Korea and Japan, known as the Trilateral Military Alliance. This proposal aims not only to deter Pyongyang, but also to enhance security in the East Asia region. The alliance represents a concentration and institutionalization of security affairs among the three countries.

In the realm of international relations, trilateralism refers to relationships involving three entities that share the same political goals and strategic vision of regional and international arrangements. Trilateral cooperation, also known as trilateralism, is often described as more complex than bilateral cooperation but simpler than traditional multilateralism (Kamphausen, Park, Sahashi, & Szwalwinski, 2018, p. 3). It is believed that Trilateralism holds a bigger potential to deliver significant benefits to each member in the security sector. It represents a more streamlined form of multilateralism, inheriting some basic advantages of traditional multilateralism while avoiding the

most serious problems (Zhang, 2020). These alliances expected to achieve cost saving and multiply benefits through the division of responsibilities, the equitable distribution of common assets, and the added protection provided by having a stronger country as an ally (Tetra, 2004, p. 136).

Although an alliance can provide benefits for participating countries, President Moon Jae in made an unexpected statement during his interview with Channel News Asia Singapore. President Moon Jae in stated,

"South Korea-U.S. Military cooperation as well as Japan has become important, at countering North Korea's nuclear and missile provocations. But I do not think it is appropriate to develop the cooperation to a level of (trilateral) military alliance." (Yonhap News, 2017)

Moon also stated that the U.S. was indeed an ally of South Korea. He said: "For (South) Korea, the alliance with the U.S. is more important than anything in safeguarding our security. In particular, the cooperation between Korea and the US is essential to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. Therefore, we need to maintain the traditional stance of the great importance of bilateral relations with the U.S." (Lim, 2017).

Why did President Moon Jae in firmly reject the invitation from US and Japan to join the Trilateral Military Alliance? His words represented South Korean foreign policy, which seems neglected the best strategy to resolve the security problem.

This article will discuss the reasons for South Korea's refusal to join the trilateral military alliance with the U.S. and Japan using a qualitative approach on the library research methods. By using the wide spread materials, namely scholarly articles, books, reports, and news, this research also used a primary data obtained from an in-depth interview with a senior scholar from South Korea who possesses firsthand knowledge and extensive experience in the field. It offers qualitative researchers a way to capture the lived experiences of participants (Janesick, 2014). The researchers believe that interpretive qualitative research does not reduce the value of research as a scientific work.

METHODS

In about the realm of foreign policy studies, researchers often employ literature study methods and interpretive approaches. This research is a qualitative study that aims to understand the reasons for South Korea's refusal to join the trilateral military alliance with the US and Japan. Various approaches are commonly employed in this endeavor, including basic theory, ethnography, action research, phenomenological research, and narrative research. Despite some similarities, each approach emphasizes different goals and perspectives. In qualitative research, the researcher perceives themselves as an "instrument" within the research process. Consequently, all conclusions, perceptions, and views are interpreted through the researcher's personal perspective. Therefore, when documenting qualitative analysis methods, it is important to focus on the chosen strategy and provide a detailed description of the choices made in collecting and evaluating data.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Benefits of Trilateralism and Military Alliance

Trilateralism is a burden and responsibility sharing strategy. It may be hold in separated sector, such as economic, social, and security. This collaborative approach become popular in the US-led structured of international relations in East Asia (Zhang, 2020). In the military sector, it is closely related with the term "alliance".

Dr. Sangit Sarita cites the opinion of Arnold Wolfer to define an alliance as a promise of joint military assistance between two or more sovereign states. Alliances play a central role in international relations because they are seen as an integral part of statehood. An alliance is formed between two or more countries to fight a common enemy. Weak countries often form alliances when they need protection against strong countries, also to defend themselves. Conversely, strong countries enter into alliances to fight other powerful countries. The state expects its allies to help militarily and

diplomatically during the conflict (Dwivedi, 2012, p. 1-2).

The main benefits of the alliance are obviously security, but many non-security benefits can also be obtained from the alliance. Security benefits within a joint defense alliance include a lower possibility of deterrence, offensive and defensive capabilities, and the prevention of alliances forming between allies and one's enemies (preclusion). The Alliance provides a substantial increase quickly in security. Increasing military capability independently will take a long time, whereas alliances become a reliable choice (Chun, 2000, p. 76).

Trilateralism between the U.S., South Korea, and Japan is a necessary and effective approach to tackle many of the challenges of traditional and non-traditional inside and outside Asia. The most successful trilateral initiatives tend to be rooted in a shared commitment to addressing common threats and promoting concrete common interests, rather than being solely driven by the desire of the three countries to collaborate (Kamphausen, Park, Sahashi, & Szwalwinski, 2018, p. 2).

The intrinsic value of trilateral relations is a legitimate form of regional cooperation that benefits all participating parties. Muhui Zhang argues that because the number of cooperative partners is relatively small, multilateralism is widely known for efficiency, considering that complications and transaction costs are expected to be proportional to the number of actors involved in multilateral arrangements. It is not unusual for members with very different interests decide to stop multilateral cooperation because of the high bureaucratic burden and administrative costs involved (Kamphausen, Park, Sahashi, & Szwalwinski, 2018, p. 5). Trilateralism also offers many of the same benefits as traditional multilateralisms. In the first place, to ensure a stable and effective communication flow by institutionalizing the contact point for partners. Trilateral cooperation also facilitates long-term policy planning and fosters institutional development among the countries involved.

Following the discussion of trilateralism, it is also necessary to discuss the importance of a military alliance. This is to focus the discussion not only on the benefits of the alliance, but also underscores on the military alliances planned to be formed by the United States. The perceived benefit of joining a formal military alliance is rooted in the belief that collective defense arrangement, by providing formal military commitments and other elements of national power among signatories, serve as a deterrent to potential enemies (Cook, 2013, p. 561). In the case of the U.S., South Korea and Japan, the potential enemy is North Korea, posing threats to the stability and security of the East Asian region.

Formal alliance also carries a symbolic dimension, which was briefly captured by former Secretary of State Madeline Albright when she stated that NATO as an expression of indispensable transatlantic relations. Proponent of such alliance firmly believe that this official agreement promotes peace and avoid war. Another benefit of the military alliance, which also mentioned earlier, is that they facilitate the equitable distribution of responsibilities among members. For example, NATO carried out Article 5 of the Washington Agreement after the terrorist attacks on 9/11 and then carried out military forces to Afghanistan in its first "outside the territory" operation. The involvement of the alliance allowed the establishment of the International Security Assistance Force Afghanistan (ISAF) which eventually grew to have 50 member states. By February 2013, there were more than 100.000 ISAF troops serving in Afghanistan. An alliance offers a greater perception of "legitimacy" in the international system, especially when it is compared to unilateral actions undertaken by one country, regardless of its size or strength. Alliance also offers access to geo-strategic (i.e., rights, flight permits, etc.) to main areas where the national interest is at stake (Cook, 2013, p. 563).

Returning to the topic of the trilateral military alliance, if South Korea is included in this military alliance, there will be many benefits that can be obtained. The synergy between the benefits of trilateralism which "makes it easy" and the military alliance that provides strength and deterrence factors, is particularly noteworthy. Additionally, the alignment of common goals between the U.S.,

South Korea and Japan, where all of them want peace in the East Asia region. So, the formation of this alliance is worth considering.

South Korea's Domestic Politics in Moon Jae in Administration

Moon Jae In replaced Park Geun He and inaugurated in May 2017. Coming from the liberal Democratic Party, Moon marked a significant shift in South Korean leadership, as he was the first elected president from the liberal party after about a decade South Korea was led by a conservative party. He won by gaining 41.1% of the vote (Mosler, 2017, p. 1).

After he was elected as the President of the Republic of Korea, Moon Jae In has been faced with challenges both domestically and internationally. Moon's victory was supported by his success attracting the attention of the South Korean people, who asked the presidential candidates to focus on domestic issues, especially the issue of corruption, economic inequality, youth unemployment, and the amount of political influence given by conglomerates in South Korea (Altbach, 2017, p. 1). While not the sole determinant, domestic condition, especially relates to the National Assembly and public opinion has getting influential to the decision making of foreign policy (Snyder, 2018).

Regarding the views of the South Korean people about North Korea, reported by the Asan Public Opinion Report, the view on reunification with North Korea continues to increase from year to year. The image of North Korea has been changing, which was initially negative. People viewed the country as a threat, and they always solve problems in a hardcore way. However, this perception has gradually shifted towards a more positive view. The South Korean community is increasingly supportive of reunification efforts, considering it a paramount goal for South Korea at this time. It may say that there is a release of historical trauma (Chun, 2021).

Numerous factors underlie the desire for reunification of South Korea and North Korea. 33.3% stated it is for economic growth and, while 28.7% said to stop the threat of war. In addition, some of them also voted for reunification because it was seen as reducing human rights abuses both in North Korea and in South Korea and contribute to peace to the East Asia region (Miller, 2018).

There appears to be an inverse relationship between public opinion about North Korea and the United States in South Korea. Asan Public Report launches, the perception of the United States shifted from initially positive to negative, starting from the reign of Roh Moo Hyun to the current Moon Jae In. The South Korean community began to see the U.S. as an obstacle and even a threat to South Korea, especially in the context of Korean reunification. The U.S. is considered unable to help Seoul to reconcile with Pyongyang.

In contrast to the situation with North Korea and the U.S., relations between South Korea and Japan are always overshadowed by dark experiences in the past. The wound about the cruel colonization of Japan in South Korea remains deeply ingrained in Korean society. They still see that Japan is a cruel country. They still demand an official apology from the Japanese government for victims, particularly concerning the issue of comfort women. More than that, history as a collective memory have been developed and memorized from one generation to the next (Ernst, 2020).

There have been various demonstrations and rejection of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) installation in Seongju, South Korea. These actions, along with efforts aimed at normalizing relations with Japan, and blow-up media on surveys conducted by many institutions were conducted to show the public voice of the South Korean community.

On the other hand, the Democratic Party (Minjoo Party), to which Moon Jae In belongs, has long been known to oppose the THAAD installation from the start and prefers to improve relations with North Korea through peaceful means and negotiations. Notably, the Democratic Party has emerged as the winning party in elections and holds the highest number of seats in parliament. Consequently, decisions and parliamentary approval will be more influenced by this group (Time, 2016). Parliament in the camp of Moon expressed his desire to reopen the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) and re-run the Sunshine Policy which had been terminated for 2 periods (Mosler, 2017).

However, this does not signify the withdrawal from the position of state ally with the U.S. Instead, Moon's administration continues to see Washington as the most important guarantor of South Korea's national security. At the same time, there will be more autonomy for South Korea to tackle problems in the region and aims to establish partnerships among equals. The aim is to ensure that North Korea stops its nuclear weapons program and ultimately denuclearize (Mosler, 2017, p. 11).

When discussing cooperation between South Korea and Japan, this discussion is always complex. The most frequently cited challenge in achieving effective trilateral policy coordination is the difficult relationship between Seoul and Tokyo (Smith, 2017, p. 11). Experts argue that the bilateral cooperation is only in the aspect of economic cooperation, as both are countries with high economic growth rates in East Asia. However, it will be difficult for both to expand this collaboration to other fields such as politics and the military, and expectation regarding the progress of cooperation between the two is very small.

South Korea's sentiment for owning the Japanese military on Korean soil continued to limit the full integration of planning military alliances. Keeping all the three countries in line at a time when diplomacy takes place will be difficult (Smith, 2017, p. 11-12).

The Influence of External Politics

It is important to recognize that not only domestic factors but also external factors can influence a policy making process. The factor of international politics referred in this journal is the behavior of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The trilateral military alliance formation is aimed at facing a joint threat for the U.S., South Korea, and Japan, namely the threat of nuclear weapons from North Korea, a threat that has continued to lurk since the end of the cold war.

The efforts to establish a trilateral military alliance have existed since the 1990s and over time, relations between the three countries has increased. Recognizing an increase in relations between South Korea-U.S.- Japan, Beijing began to feel uncomfortable, coupled with efforts to form a military alliance between the three countries. China considers the trilateral military alliance will bring security instability in the East Asia region (Easley, 2017). Since the 1990s, China has been worried that the U.S. wants to form an alliance like NATO on its doorstep (Perlez, 2017).

Previously, both the U.S. and South Korea had taken into consideration how to deal with the nuclear threat. One of the ways taken by these two countries is by installing Terminal High Altitude Area Defense or commonly called THAAD. Additionally, the agreement of the Trilateral Information Sharing Agreement (TISA) to share information between intelligence conducted by South Korea and Japan was put in place. However, these actions were viewed as a dangerous step by Beijing, as it can knit Tokyo and Seoul closer in military cooperation, leading to the possibility of a full-fledged military alliance between South Korea-U.S.-Japan. Song Zhongping, a Chinese-based military analyst more clearly conveyed,

"This could mean a three-party alliance, rather than two-party alliances [of the U.S. and Japan, and the U.S. and South Korea], and this would pose a threat to the stability of Northeast Asia," (Zhou, 2016)

Former Major General of the People's Liberation Army in China, Xu Guanyu, said that if an alliance between South Korea, the United States and Japan was formed, it would not give Chinese leaders any choice but to lean towards the Beijing-Moscow alliance in attempt to counterbalance this development. However, this could be a trigger to an arms race in East Asia (Zhou, 2016).

Since the concern arose, the PRC had not yet gotten the right momentum to prevent the formation of the trilateral military alliance. Beijing needed to put pressure on one of the parties involved, with South Korea being the most likely target in their eyes (Perlez, 2017).

After TISA, which China believed would not be agreed by South Korea and Japan, in the leadership of President Park Geun Hye, South Korea has rejected proposals from the U.S. to install a more effective high-tech anti-missile system and incorporate its independent system into a

comprehensive joint network (Klinger, *The Importance of THAAD Missile Defense*, 2015, p. 22). The plans to install THAAD in South Korea have become a momentum for China. There is a lot of controversy regarding the rejection of the THAAD installation and the pressure from China.

The PRC, in opposition to the formation of larger collaboration involving South Korea and other countries, implemented unofficial sanctions to South Korea in several aspects, particularly through economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure. Several meetings between government officials were canceled unilaterally. In the economic sector, the PRC boycotted the entertainment industry, restricted exports and imports of goods and services, and curtailed tourism to South Korea (Easley, 2017). Some programs that feature South Korean pop music (K-pop) and actors are suspended or canceled without explanation. China Central Television (CCTV), a state-owned TV channel, reported that the government's broadcast regulator has banned the airing of South Korea TV shows. Since July 2016, China has blocked access to goods and services from South Korea. In March 2017 the Chinese Regulator banned the sale of several South Korean products, including certain types of air purifiers, high-tech toilet seats, and cosmetics, for security reasons. China also banned tourist visits to South Korea. Until 2017 the number of tourists entering South Korea fell by approximately 60%, because the majority of tourists came from the China (Meick & Salidjanova, 2017, p. 7). As a result, the economic relations between the two countries were disrupted and had a significant impact on tourism industry in South Korea.

After President Park Geun Hye's demise, the elected President, Moon Jae In, was expected to be a new hope for South Koreans especially to improve relations with North Korea and overcome problems with China. Shortly after being elected in May 2017, Moon Jae In contacted the President of China, Xi Jinping. Both of them agreed to meet as soon as possible (Panda, 2017).

After the election of President Moon Jae In, China began to show a change in attitude towards South Korea, and the PRC's economic wrath seemed to have begun to decline. Although almost all of Lotte's stores are still closed, K-Pop music performances have begun to be held again in June. The Chinese airline, Spring Airline, began rescheduling flights to South Korea for the return of Chinese tourists traveling to South Korea (Meick & Salidjanova, 2017, p. 8).

Moon Jae In had his initial meeting with Xi Jinping in July at the G20 Summit in Germany. Unfortunately, during the meeting, both parties had not reached an agreement. However, President Moon continued his effort to improve relations with China. In the APEC Summit held in Da Nang, Vietnam, Moon Jae In was again scheduled to meet Xi Jinping. At this meeting, he focused on improving and normalizing economic cooperation between the two countries. Moon also invited the PRC to actively participate in sanctions against North Korea's nuclear. This is due to the closeness between China and North Korea. Beijing has also previously expressed concerns about North Korean nuclear weapons development and asked Pyongyang for denuclearize (Dong-A Ilbo, 2017).

In December 2017, Moon Jae In made his first visit to China, marking his third meeting with Xi Jinping. Quoted in the South China Morning Post interview, Moon Jae In said that the main purpose of this visit was to rebuild trust between the two countries as it had been strained for the past 25 years. In this meeting, it was also discussed about THAAD. The two leaders engaged in candid conversations about their views on this issue. It was stated that Beijing understood the purpose of installing the anti-missile defense system and was convinced that the system currently installed was indeed not directed to China (Weibing, 2017).

However, China had lingering concerns, primarily related to the potential establishment of another system similar to THAAD used by South Korea, the U.S. and Japan to "spy on" China (Perlez, 2017). Therefore, China agreed to make economic improvements and revoke sanctions but requested South Korea to be able to fulfill 3 conditions. Beijing then offered a new agreement called "three nos":

1. there is no additional THAAD installation in South Korea;
2. there is no participation in a joint strategic missile defense system with the U.S.;

3. there is no establishment of the South Korea-U.S.-Japan trilateral military alliance (Panda, 2017). In response to this offer, South Korea stated publicly to comply with “three nos” (Abrahamian & Son, 2017). After the statement, South Korea seemed to keep a distance from the U.S. and Japan. Moon's decision was disliked by the U.S., as South Korea was deemed to have surrendered to various pressures and bluffs from China. However, this decision was then supported by Moon Jae In's attitude in an interview with News Asia Singapore stating,

"South Korea-U.S. military cooperation as well as Japan has become important, but the cooperation is aimed at North Korea's nuclear and missile provocations. But I don't think it is appropriate to develop cooperation to a level of (trilateral) military alliance." (Yonhap News, 2017).

Following the extensive the efforts made by President Moon to improve relations with China, after a meeting of the two heads of state, Moon Jae In and Xi Jinping in December 2017, the sanctions given by China to South Korea began to ease. This marked a positive development in the bilateral relationship and signaled a thaw in tensions between the two countries.

It can be observed that the THAAD installation then became a momentum for China to prevent the formation of alliances for South Korea, the U.S. and Japan (Perlez, 2017). Although in the end THAAD remained installed in South Korea with the understanding of China, but the installed batteries will not increase according to ‘three nos’ agreement.

Seeing the efforts made by the Moon Jae In government to improve the country's relations with China, some observers attributed this to China's position on South Korea. South Korea's domestic conditions prefer to improve relations with North Korea is a concern for Moon Jae In's government. South Korea considers that China the “close ones” to North Korea. Moreover, with Beijing's statement that they also agreed on the Pyongyang's denuclearization was seen as an opportunity for Seoul to bring North Korea back to the negotiating table and stop its nuclear test. Representatives from the Blue House stated,

"The coming in South Korea-China relations, [the remarks] is significant in pressing China to emphasize its role and show more active attitude on resolving the North Korean nuclear issue," (Seong, 2017).

In December, South Korea and China agreed on four principles to secure peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, which consisted of 1) the war on the Korean Peninsula was intolerable; 2) the principle of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula will be well maintained; 3) all problems, including denuclearization of North Korea, will be settled peacefully through dialogue and negotiation; and 4) improving inter-Korean relations will be very helpful in resolving problems involving the Korean Peninsula (McGuire, 2018). Beholding the attitude of South Korea that agreed on a ‘three nos’ agreement with China, it can be said that it would be difficult for the trilateral military alliance to be formed between South Korea-U.S.-Japan (Park, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Security is one of the factors needed by a country to be a sovereign country. However, it is not the sole determinant of foreign policy decisions. The rejection of South Korea to the US initiative on security trilateralism shows the development of non-security consideration to be the more important factors in its foreign policy.

While South Korea, the United States and Japan shared the common goal, namely the denuclearization of North Korea, the decision to reject participation in the military alliance underscores the significance of other factors in shaping South Korea's foreign policy. The alliance can bring benefits for its members, all of whom are able to save the cost of cooperation, the sharing of the burden, the effectiveness of minilateralism, as well as the effect deterrence for North Korea if they are really going to break down the war. However, South Korea under the leadership of Moon Jae In chose to refuse to join the military alliance. This highlights the complexity of foreign policy decision-

making, where security concerns must be balanced against a range of other interests and factors.

This rejection is influenced by various factors. First, The Democratic Party that supports reconciliation with North Korea is the winner of the election and now dominates the parliamentary seats, so the policy is clearly a major concern in the country.

The South Korean people ask the government to focus on domestic affairs. Through various demonstrations and surveys published in the mass media, the public has voiced their opinions regarding the attitude that the government needs to take. The community agrees more if the government reconciles with North Korea. Negative views about North Korea have changed a lot. While it was once considered a military threat, North Korea is now considered a brother by the community.

On the contrary, a positive view of the U.S. as a protector of South Korea has now begun to fade, replaced by the view that the US is an obstacle to the reconciliation process on the Korean peninsula. Unlike Japan, which has maintained a relatively consistent negative image since the end of Japanese colonialism in Korea, people's views on it have not changed much. Japan continues to be considered an aggressive country that has given a deep wound to the people of South Korea.

The next factor in South Korea's foreign policy considerations is from the international context, particularly the ongoing concern regarding North Korea's nuclear program. Various ways have been done to stop it. One of South Korea's controversial policies is the installation of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in collaboration with the U.S. This THAAD installation received bad response, both domestically and internationally. China strongly opposed THAAD's policy, arguing that the system would be able to reach China, and South Korea could "spy on" its nuclear weapons project. China then gave unofficial sanctions to South Korea where they stopped exporting and importing goods and services, banned tourism, and stopped broadcasting programs originating from South Korea. It becomes a driving factor for South Korea to bring North Korea back to the negotiating table for denuclearization without military means.

Under Moon Jae In's leadership and his efforts to improve relations with China, the sanctions began to loosen up. However, the PRC gave an offer in the form of an agreement called 'three nos', which stipulated that there was no additional THAAD installation in South Korea, no participation in a joint strategic missile defense system with the U.S., and no establishment of the South Korea-U.S.-Japan trilateral military alliance. South Korea then publicly announced that they agreed and chose to obey the "three nos" despite criticism from Washington. As a result, South Korea maintained a certain level of distance from the U.S. and Japan in its foreign policy approach.

These diplomatic decisions reflect South Korea's efforts to balance its relationships with key regional partners while addressing security and geopolitical concerns.

This gives a clear picture that South Korea refused to join the trilateral military alliance with the U.S. and Japan because of the influence that occurred in South Korea's domestic politics and the pressure from China as well as South Korea-China's Three Nos agreement.

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