

**Trilateral Tools for Managing Complex Contingencies:
U.S.-Japan-Korea Cooperation in Disaster Relief &
Stabilization/Reconstruction Missions**

An IFPA Seminar Report

November 2005

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Dozens of government officials, foreign policy experts, and nongovernmental representatives from the United States, Japan, and South Korea gathered for an IFPA seminar in Washington, D.C., on November 2, 2005, to discuss the importance of international cooperation for managing complex contingencies. Participants examined lessons learned from recent complex contingency operations, the tools to improve crisis and contingency management, and the potential role of U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral cooperation in these matters.

The meeting took place against the backdrop of recent major contingencies that were simply too large for any single country to handle on its own. The December 2004 earthquake and tsunami in Southeast Asia, for example, stimulated a multilateral disaster relief mission on a scale not seen before. The affected geographic region stretched from East Asia to East Africa. With deaths numbering in the hundreds of thousands, local government capabilities washed away, and violent civil conflict in many of the affected areas, an immediate and coordinated response to deliver relief was needed. The importance of international cooperation for managing complex contingencies has been further demonstrated by peace support and reconstruction operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the October 2005 earthquake in Pakistan and India.

The seminar, *Trilateral Tools for Managing Complex Contingencies: U.S.-Japan-Korea Cooperation in Disaster Relief and Stabilization/Reconstruction Missions*, was the final event in an eighteen-month study on the trilateral relationship, supported in large part by the Japan Foundation's Center for Global Partnership (CGP). The seminar followed the recent publication of *Tools for Trilateralism: Improving U.S.-Japan-Korea Cooperation to Manage Complex Contingencies*, which describes the findings from research, interviews, and workshops conducted by IFPA and its project partners, the Japan Forum on International Relations in Tokyo and Yonsei University's Graduate School of International Studies in Seoul.

The three countries exist and operate in a region prone to natural disasters, participants noted. Chief among them are typhoons, floods, earthquakes, and tsunamis. As a Japanese participant pointed out, one third of natural disasters occur in Asia, but one half of the deaths from natural disasters occur in the region, due to a combination of factors including dense population, the relatively low level of economic development, and the severity of the events themselves. This disproportionate ratio suggests the potential benefits of improved disaster relief and consequence management cooperation. Participants highlighted a number of other benefits as well, noting their shared interests in promoting democracy and stability in various parts of the world and in keeping vital sea lanes open for oil and trade shipments.

Improving Civil-Military Cooperation

In the seminar presentations and subsequent panel discussion, participants tried to identify opportunities, priorities, and key challenges to realizing greater cooperation in a practical manner. They were supportive of the need for greater training in order to improve military-to-military and civil-military cooperation and to retain lessons learned from recent disaster relief and stabilization/reconstruction operations. A U.S. military participant expressed his pleasant surprise at learning of the resident expertise of the U.S. Agency of International Development (USAID) and United Nations (UN) staff during the tsunami relief mission. The military and civilian respondents quickly developed a good working relationship, he said, but joint civil-military training for disaster relief and education on the role and capabilities of military and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) would help future disaster relief operations operate more smoothly from the beginning.

The same U.S. military participant mentioned several other lessons he learned during his involvement in the tsunami relief operation. Speed matters in disaster relief, he said, and the international response must include the immediate delivery of such aid items as water, food, and medical supplies, and early assessment of requirements for mid- to long-term aid. He also supported creation of a hub – on the model of the Combined Coordination Center used for tsunami relief – to manage compatibility problems among states and among UN agencies, NGOs, and the military. This coordination group also benefits from operating in an open, unclassified manner, which promotes greater trust and friendlier working relationships. Finally, it is also important to end the relief operation in a positive, dignified fashion, this participant believed. Sometimes the right choice of words can help: speaking of “transition” once the mission is completed, for example, as opposed to “disengagement” or “dissolution” can create a positive impression that helps the operation run more smoothly. Avoiding staying too long in the host country is also crucial to bringing relief operations to a successful close. States offering relief should leave before they become unpopular, so as to foster support for future relief operations.

A former U.S. State Department official involved in the tsunami relief effort praised the informal nature of the core group during tsunami relief (United States, Japan, Australia, and India). This allowed efficient use of time, development of good working relationships, and quick adjustment to changing events, he said. Another former U.S. State Department official brought up the civil-military relationship, saying that cooperation between NGOs and the military still needs to be improved if lessons from past relief operations are to be incorporated into future operations.

A Japanese participant reinforced the recommendation of improved training, suggesting that areas of responsibility could be more clearly delineated before disaster relief or reconstruction missions begin. This official added that regional training should include countries at high risk for natural disasters, since these potential host countries would be at the center of any multilateral response. The official suggested that standard operating procedures could be developed to settle worries over sovereignty and address the circumstances in which foreign troops can offer assistance, as well as the activities foreign militaries are authorized to conduct outside their home country. He noted that the Japanese Self-Defense Forces are accustomed to

carrying out a wide variety of disaster relief and crisis management tasks, citing as one example its role of culling chickens in response to a potential bird flu outbreak. Other countries' militaries have different capabilities, priorities, and legal parameters, so these kinds of issues need to be discussed and well understood ahead of joint operations.

Further recommendations for improving civil-military cooperation included one from a former U.S. State Department official, who suggested that the military-USAID relationship tends to operate optimally when a U.S. State Department officer serves as an intermediary. A U.S. government official praised the early improvement in training seen during the 2005 Cobra Gold exercise in Thailand, and he stressed the need to continue to institutionalize lessons learned from training. Another U.S. government official suggested that the civilian sector lags behind the military in international cooperation and that civilian institutions need to improve their ability to work with other nations' civilian institutions during complex contingency operations.

The Role of China

Participants noted that China was a crucial factor when considering ways to improve trilateral cooperation. The general feeling was summarized by a Korean government participant who said that China's size and location make it a central part of the East Asian region and that Beijing must be included in these discussions in some way. He was optimistic that by working together, the United States, Japan, and Korea can engage China to further stabilize the region, though he noted that growing nationalism in all of these countries could undermine such efforts.

A retired U.S. military participant agreed that China plays an important role in East Asia and trilateral cooperation, but he sounded a note of caution about the difficulty of getting China to engage with other states. While China has recently demonstrated greater acceptance of multilateralism and has also accepted the utility of confidence building measures, he said, it is not clear what kinds of incentives will appeal most to Beijing or what engagement strategy the trilateral states should adopt. One American noted a number of regional security cooperation initiatives in which China could participate, but added that the obstacle has often been official reluctance in Washington to include the Chinese military.

A former U.S. State Department official involved in the tsunami relief effort expressed hope that China had learned from its response to the 2004 tsunami. Initially, China claimed that its status as a developing country rendered it unable to offer large-scale assistance to the affected countries, though it quickly changed course and offered modest amounts of aid. This experience may have showed China the need to play a positive role in the region on these issues, the former official suggested.

Another former U.S. State Department official expressed a belief that military-to-military cooperation among East Asian states functions very well, with the exception of China. A U.S. representative of an NGO that operates in Korea agreed on the importance of China's participation and reported that NGOs were making progress in their relations with Chinese organizations and the Chinese government. To improve its relations with NGOs, for example, China has agreed to recognize an international standard established by Asian NGOs for their

involvement in humanitarian crisis response efforts, a move already taken by Japan, though not yet by South Korea.

A Broader Role for the Trilateral States

The values and strategic interests shared by the United States, Japan, and Korea were mentioned as a foundation for using trilateral cooperation to benefit the entire Asia region. A Korean government participant said that Japan and Korea are the only East Asian countries that share with the United States the same commitment to democracy and a market economy. He stated his belief that these values are the keys to prosperity and stability and that by spreading them the trilateral group can make East Asia more stable. Engaging on the basis of these values can help bring stability to the trouble spots of China and North Korea, as well.

A Japanese official observed that democracy and market economics were steadily becoming accepted in the Pacific region. He said that furthering this process would bring major benefits for the trilateral group. Other interests, such as respect for human rights and the need for the steady flow of oil from the Middle East, were also increasingly shared throughout the region.

A former U.S. State Department official agreed that the economic interests of the trilateral group were shared by the broader Asia region. He emphasized the benefit to all of safe, reliable sea lanes and a stable supply of energy. He offered the opinion that South Korea needs to think more globally if the trilateral relationship is to play a larger regional role. A South Korean government official agreed. He went on to say that, as South Korea is now one of the largest economies in the world, South Koreans are realizing they need to be less parochial in their interests and government leaders are making an effort to think globally. South Korea's participation in Iraq is part of this effort, he continued, and South Korean leaders realize that they have an interest in Middle Eastern oil and are helping the United States to stabilize the Middle East.

A Japanese official posited that the wealth and size of the trilateral group make it an indispensable leader in the East Asia region. Together, the group has the financial resources, logistical capability, and planning ability to deal with complex contingencies throughout the region. A former official seconded the idea that East Asia would welcome greater trilateral activity. This individual pointed to the growth in parties participating in negotiations with North Korea to demonstrate this trend toward regionalism and the integral role of the three countries.

Some participants did express caution about the potential for greater trilateral activity. A South Korean diplomat stated that the structural incentives for trilateral cooperation were weak. During disaster assistance, he said, each country trumpets its individual contribution to the relief efforts, and this desire to advertise national assistance diminishes the incentive for trilateral or broader multilateral cooperation. He added that during the period between large-scale disasters, there is little urgency to coordinate disaster relief, an obstacle that needs to be overcome if trilateral cooperation is to play a larger role. A former U.S. State Department official urged prudence here, because each crisis is specific to each situation. This makes a large trilateral role

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more difficult, and this former official stressed that the focus needs to be on generic capabilities and methods of cooperation, rather than specific plans for various contingencies.