


New Approaches to the Trilateral Cooperation between South Korea, North Korea and Russia



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Strengthening the level of integration and connectivity between the Korean Peninsula, Eurasia, and the Russian Far East/Siberia regions is at the core of the three-decade-old trilateral cooperation project. The goal is to create a new growth engine for the Northeast Asian region by expanding the economic dynamism of the Korean Peninsula to the Russian Far East and Siberia via North Korea, making full geographical advantage of the shared borders between Russia and the Korean Peninsula.

The vision of the trilateral cooperation has been of particular interest to the parties since it was initially proposed in that it may help them establish a new value chain across Northeast Asia, and increase interdependencies between the countries involved by easing the hard-line and security-oriented stance prevailing in the region. The question that needs to be answered here is: how is it possible a vision that is bilaterally supplementary and beneficial to all parties is still unrealized?

A long list of factors may have contributed to this stalemate: amplified unfavorable geopolitical and security situations and growing security concerns, a market still in its infancy, businessmen losing interest future

of proposed megaprojects – all of which are inevitably linked to the politics of the region. To a certain extent, other factors also hampered the development of a coherent cooperation effort: ambivalent definitions of the principles and direction of the trilateral cooperation, and the overemphasis on projects that had to be carried out inside the North Korean borders. Another key reason for the delay is that the goal to connect and integrate channeled too much attention to a handful of megaprojects.

These megaprojects are in direct connection with North Korea's dismantling of its nuclear programs. The projects may not take off before the various international sanctions (e.g., the United Nations sanctions, the U.S. unilateral sanction, and others imposed by South Korea and Japan) are ended. This is especially true in that these international sanctions against North Korea were imposed when the country started testing and development of nuclear weapons and missiles, which demands the sentiment of the general public to be taken into account. Various efforts and time will be needed to make the three megaprojects a reality, on top of an agreement reached between the leaders of the countries involved and continued interest in these projects.

Among other things, it is necessary to take a new approach to the trilateral cooperation. We need to identify new locations, concepts, and projects focusing on the improvement of connectivity and integration in the region while carrying out the three existing megaprojects. To this end, the parties must take some actions.

Firstly, recalibration of the scope of the cooperation projects is required. This should be done by applying some of the universal principles of international investment and cooperation, namely development cooperation, more facilitated trade, and foreign direct investment. The goal here is to re-categorize the characteristics of the trilateral cooperation into four classes of frameworks of cooperation: trade and investment between the three countries, ODA, and regional integration. These categories borrow concepts from policies adopted by developed or neighboring countries toward underdeveloped or in-transition countries in the international arena, and their official development assistance policies. New projects and programs need to be created by combining different existing ones.

Secondly, the spatial boundaries also need some expansion. Projects for the trilateral cooperation should not be limited to cross-border businesses in border areas on the Korean Peninsula. Projects that build connections between the three countries and encompass the border regions on both sides (in the mold of the megaprojects) involve a space of cooperation

beyond the Korean Peninsula all across North Korea. However, no other projects can be operated this way. A change of perspective may be needed to include new projects of trilateral joint investment and cooperation in a specific country or region such as the Rason SEZ in North Korea, the Kaesong Industrial Complex run by South Korea, and the advanced development zones in the Russian Far East. The trilateral cooperation may proceed in the form of joint participation by the three countries in existing projects led by a third-party country or the international community.

Thirdly, soft infrastructure construction may become an essential part of the trilateral cooperation projects along with other infrastructure construction projects or development cooperation programs, which include joint research, the establishment of a policy coordination mechanism, and the signing of a comprehensive partnership agreement (CEPA) between the two Koreas and Russia.

Considering that railways will be the leading area of the trilateral cooperation, the partnership between the three parties may be strengthened in a number of related areas through the Organization for Co-operation between Railways (OSJD), of which all three parties are members. The areas in question include logistics connectivity projects, the establishment of industry standards for rail tracks (in line with the IEC), and the revision and modification of existing international standards. Fish processing, joint fish resource studies, and other joint research projects may be worthy of consideration.

Also required is the establishment of a track 1.5 based coordinating body to identify new trilateral cooperation projects, speed up the implementation of the existing ones, and develop new ideas. For instance, it may be possible to establish a policy coordinating organization inside the Far East Development Ministry or the Far Eastern Federal University, and present and review the results at the annual Eastern Economic Forum conference.

The implementation of these new approaches is closely related to denuclearization and peace settlement on the Korean Peninsula. In the end, peace on the Korean Peninsula will be a real starting point for triangular cooperation. **KIEP**