Towards an Era of Peace and Common Prosperity in Northeast Asia

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First of all, I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to the Center for Economic Integration at Sejong University and the Hanns Seidel Foundation Korea for inviting me to take part in this conference. Also, my special thanks go to Mr. PARK Woo-Hee, the President of Sejong University. I am all the more grateful and honored that today’s conference has been convened to celebrate and promote the mission and vision of the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat.

I. Background

Trilateral cooperation goes back 12 years ago, when the leaders of the three countries had an informal breakfast meeting on the occasion of the ASEAN+3 in November 1999. This was the first meeting among the heads of governments of these three countries in modern times. Considering the historic and geographic proximity, such meeting was certainly long overdue, to say the least.

Since then, the three countries have made some significant progress in strengthening their cooperation. For example, rather than meeting on the sidelines of ASEAN+3 summits they have started to hold independent trilateral summit meetings, starting in 2008. In 2009, the President Lee Myung-bak proposed to set up a permanent Secretariat for the implementation of effective and systematic management of trilateral cooperation during the second trilateral summit meeting.

On the occasion of the third Trilateral Summit, the agreement on the establishment of the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat was adopted and thus, the consensus to set up a permanent secretariat in Seoul was finally reached among the three countries.

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Upon the agreement signed and ratified by each of the three parties in 2010, the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat was officially launched in Seoul, September 2011.

II. A New Era of Northeast Asian Cooperation: Significance of the Establishment of the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat

Even though the presence of a permanent cooperative body itself can hold much importance, especially in the area where cooperation has been considered unrealistic, I would like to further emphasize on the significance that the establishment of the Secretariat holds beyond its symbolic meaning:

First, the establishment of a permanent secretariat represents the first constructive effort to institutionalize trilateral cooperation among Korea, China and Japan. Upon the establishment of the Secretariat, it is expected that the three states will strengthen their cooperation in a wider range of areas by fostering the existing cooperative mechanisms and further systemizing them. Jean Monnet, the founder of European Union has also underlined that sustainability of the cooperation is largely dependent upon institutionalization efforts. In essence, institutionalizing the existing cooperation among the three states represents a big step towards systematic and efficient management of the cooperation.

Second, the Secretariat allows the three countries to cooperate on equal terms. The three member states take an equal share of the Secretariat’s activities and contribute equal shares to its budget. The Secretary-General is also appointed on a rotational basis in the order of Korea, Japan and China with two-year tenure of office. Each party other than the Government of the country of the Secretary-General shall nominate a Deputy Secretary-General respectively. The General Services Staff members of the Secretariat are also recruited from all three countries, each sharing 1/3 of the total numbers.

Third, the Secretariat exhibits political will and solidarity to bring peace and prosperity to Northeast Asia. As you know, much of our history reveals that the most frequent meetings or encounters among the three states took place during the war. The fact that the leaders of the three governments and legislative bodies agreed to establish the Secretariat conveys powerful, forward-looking political message that three countries are willing to overcome past rivalries and tensions, and pursue common prosperity and peace.

Fourth, the member countries of the Secretariat are composed of top-tier economic