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## The ROK-US-Japan Trilateral Security Cooperation

By Alex Soohoon Lee

# ROK-US-Japan Trilateral Security Cooperation: Commitments, Progress, Opportunities & Challenges Ahead

By Alex Soohoon Lee

## Korea Institute for Defense Analyses

Trilateral security cooperation between the Republic of Korea (ROK), the United States (US), and Japan has become one of the most significant security frameworks in the Indo-Pacific region. Together, the three countries account for one-third of the world economy, and all three are ranked in the top ten in terms of military power.<sup>1</sup> Each of them has released an Indo-Pacific strategy, which emphasizes the importance of trilateral cooperation. In the face of increasing provocations by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and by adopting a strikingly new outlook on Indo-Pacific security issues, the ROK, the US, and Japan have decided to strengthen their cooperation.

Progress in trilateral security cooperation began with President Yoon Suk-yeol's bold move to normalize relations with Japan and to signal the linkages between the ROK-US bilateral and ROK-US-Japan trilateral contexts. In March 2023, President Yoon traveled to Tokyo and, with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, stressed the need to strengthen cooperation for future generations.<sup>2</sup> In the first summit meeting between President Yoon and President Joe Biden, just two weeks after Yoon's inauguration in May 2022, the two leaders underscored the importance of ROK-US-Japan trilateral security cooperation in response to growing DPRK-related challenges, as well as the need to bolster the rules-based international order.

At the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in November 2022, the three leaders issued the Phnom Penh Statement on Trilateral Partnership for the Indo-Pacific, which mostly dealt with sharing warning data on DPRK missiles in real-time.<sup>3</sup> During the 2023 ROK-US summit, which commemorated the 70th anniversary of the alliance, Yoon and Biden reemphasized the significance of trilateral cooperation. They acknowledged the progress made toward sharing DPRK missile-warning data in real-time and supported regularizing anti-submarine and missile-defense exercises.<sup>4</sup>

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Without Yoon's direct bilateral engagements with Kishida, however, trilateral security cooperation would not have been possible. Such efforts have been consistently made by the two leaders. After the US-Japan summit in April 2024, President Yoon and Prime Minister Kishida held talks over the phone and exchanged views on both bilateral and trilateral issues. According to Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "in light of the challenging security environment in the Indo-Pacific, there has never been a time when closer cooperation between the two countries is more needed than now."<sup>5</sup> Normalization of the two nations has opened a door to ROK-US-Japan trilateral security cooperation.

After discussing trilateral security cooperation in a historical context, this article examines the commitments set out at the Camp David Summit; explores some of the progress made since the summit and looks at further areas for improvement; and, finally, notes persistent and future challenges for trilateral security cooperation. The article argues that to maintain the peace and prosperity of the Korean Peninsula and Indo-Pacific region, it will be critical to plan and sustain the future of trilateral cooperation and carry on the legacy that began at Camp David.

## **Historical Background**

Trilateral security cooperation is not a recent trend. US policymakers explored the idea of tying together US alliances in Asia going back to the early 1950s.<sup>6</sup> While those discussions did not result in any concrete outcomes, they show a longstanding drive in Washington to tighten the linkages between its respective alliances with Tokyo and Seoul. While Washington continued to encourage leaders of the two countries to improve bilateral relations, little progress was made throughout the rest of the decade. However, moving into the early- and mid-1960s, more concerted and successful efforts were made to initiate trilateral cooperation.<sup>7</sup>

The emergence of new leadership in South Korea under President Park Chung-hee in 1961, which aimed to modernize the ROK economy and use better ties with Japan to do so, opened new opportunities. Additionally, as the United States deepened its involvement in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War, it grappled with growing regional commitments alongside limited resources and sought ways to tighten links between Seoul and Tokyo to mitigate any destabilizing effects resulting from changes in the US force posture.

In 1964, China tested its first atomic bomb, with an explosive yield similar to the US atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the United States faced the growing challenge of negotiating with two nuclear countries in both

China and the Soviet Union. President Lyndon B. Johnson emphasized the United States would maintain defense readiness toward China because its provocative actions could pose a significant threat to allies in the region.<sup>9</sup> The following year, the ROK and Japan signed the Treaty on Basic Relations. Although the treaty did not focus on forging trilateral cooperation, it helped lay the foundation for later progress.<sup>10</sup>

Following the end of the Cold War and in the context of a growing North Korean nuclear and missile threat, more formal trilateral connections were established in the form of the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG), which served as the first official cooperative mechanism among the three countries. In 1998, the DPRK test-fired the Taepodong-1, a medium-to-long-range missile. In response, the ROK, the United States, and Japan established the TCOG to help coordinate their approaches to negotiations with the DPRK and maintain progress under the 1994 Agreed Framework.<sup>11</sup> While the TCOG dissolved by 2003, it established the groundwork for later iterations of trilateral security cooperation, including the Defense Trilateral Talks (DTT) established in 2008. The DTT, an assistant-secretary-level meeting for discussing the security environment of the Korean Peninsula, remains a venue for trilateral dialogue.<sup>12</sup>

After the DPRK conducted its third nuclear test in 2013, the three countries signed the Trilateral Information Sharing Agreement (TISA) in 2014. With the DPRK threat increasing, the three forged a whole new level of cooperation. The TISA expanded the two bilateral General Security of Military Information Agreements (GSOMIA) that the United States had with the ROK and Japan into a trilateral arrangement.<sup>13</sup> However, the mechanism was quite complex. For sharing information trilaterally, the ROK military sent information to US Forces in Korea (USFK), which then relayed it to the US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), the information hub. When INDOPACOM wanted to deliver information provided by the ROK military to the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF), it had to confirm with the ROK military and vice versa. The procedure was not efficient and often faced information delays.<sup>14</sup>

The US, ROK, and Japanese leaders established new commitments that transcended the scope of the TCOG and TISA at the Camp David Summit. They reimagined the standard of cooperation set in the past, moving to regularize and institutionalize a new level of cooperation in the face of increasing security threats in the region. The following section briefly lays out the key documents produced during the summit before exploring in more detail the broad, multi-level scope of commitments the three leaders made.

## **Commitments and Objectives of Trilateral Security Cooperation**

At the Camp David Summit, progress in trilateral security cooperation helped set up a new security architecture for the Korean Peninsula as well as for the Indo-Pacific region. At Camp David, the first venue exclusively prepared for the three countries, the leaders held extensive discussions not only on the areas of envisioned cooperation but also on the scope, principles, standards, and measures of trilateral cooperation. Preparation for the summit meeting required a great amount of effort and time, especially in a multilateral setting. Three key documents were produced at the summit.

“The Spirit of Camp David” is a joint statement of the ROK, Japan, and the United States that captured the role and policy direction of trilateral cooperation.<sup>15</sup> The “Camp David Principles” established several basic principles to promote trilateral cooperation.<sup>16</sup> The leaders also agreed to a “Commitment to Consult,” which committed the three governments “to consult trilaterally with each other, in an expeditious manner, to coordinate our responses to regional challenges, provocations, and threats affecting our collective interests and security.” While the commitment is not legally binding, the document states that the three countries “intend to share information, align our messaging, and coordinate response actions.”<sup>17</sup> Based on these three documents, the leaders articulated the scope and agenda of cooperation by establishing a range of concrete commitments.

The three leaders divided the main objectives and commitments of trilateral cooperation into global, regional, and peninsular levels. In some cases, the distinction is clear. For example, cooperation at the United Nations (UN) will be considered global, whereas Indo-Pacific issues will be categorized as regional. Yet, in other instances, trilateral objectives and commitments may overlap across multiple levels. For example, issues related to both the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait can involve all three levels because a contingency surrounding the latter would significantly influence the security of the former and would involve both regional and global powers and interests.

Moreover, the principles committed by the three parties can be applied to all three levels, albeit to different degrees, and overlap with principles supported by other multilateral and minilateral groupings. What follows is a detailed description of the trilateral commitments made at Camp David broken down along each level: global, regional, and peninsular.<sup>18</sup> However, it bears notice that even within a given level, there is application to the commitments made in the others.

## *Global Level Commitments*

On a global level, the three leaders agreed to work to “promote global prosperity.”<sup>19</sup> As members of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), they agreed to a world without nuclear weapons. Furthermore, as permanent and non-permanent members of the UN Security Council (UNSC), they expressed their respect for the spirit and charter of the United Nations.<sup>20</sup> Although all three countries have affirmed such commitments both unilaterally and in other forums, its inclusion at Camp David indicates that the task and responsibility of trilateral cooperation could go well beyond the Indo-Pacific region.

Moreover, the three leaders criticized Russia’s “unprovoked and brutal war of aggression that has shaken the foundation of the international order,” reaffirming their commitment to stand with Ukraine and upholding the values of “territorial integrity, sovereignty, and the peaceful resolution of disputes.”<sup>21</sup> It is important to highlight the three nations’ commitment to deal with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine extends beyond the Indo-Pacific region. Although each country assists Ukraine in distinct ways, they have declared unanimous support for Kyiv.

Additionally, the three leaders agreed to several measures regarding supply chains and trade. To support developing nations’ participation in the “supply chains of clean energy products,” they agreed to develop the Partnership for Resilient and Inclusive Supply-chain Enhancement (RISE). They also agreed to adopt technology protection measures to prevent the illegal trading of advanced technologies they have developed.<sup>22</sup> Such efforts to protect supply chains and trade are important because the three are major trade-oriented nations. Together, they can play an exponentially larger role in the global economy.

## *Regional Level Commitments*

Beneath yet intertwined with the global level, each country has clearly articulated the importance of regional issues in their respective Indo-Pacific strategies and the importance of trilateral cooperation therein. The US Indo-Pacific Strategy begins by stating: “The United States is an Indo-Pacific power. The region, stretching from our Pacific coastline to the Indian Ocean, is home to more than half of the world’s people, nearly two-thirds of the world’s economy, and seven of the world’s largest militaries.” Furthermore, under its Indo-Pacific Action Plan, one of the ten core lines of effort the United States will pursue to implement the overall strategy is to “expand U.S.-Japan-ROK cooperation.”<sup>23</sup> Seoul and Tokyo’s regional strategies similarly stress the importance of trilateral cooperation.

The ROK's Indo-Pacific Strategy begins with: "The Republic of Korea is an Indo-Pacific nation." It also states that close cooperation with the United States and Japan is a "useful trilateral platform for cooperation to address not only North Korea's nuclear and missile threats but also supply chain disruptions, cyber security, climate change."<sup>24</sup> While Japan has not issued a formal Indo-Pacific strategic document like the United States and the ROK, it is one of the originators of the Indo-Pacific concept – predating the United States – and has evolved its regional strategy for over a decade.<sup>25</sup> More recently, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs asserted that the "Japan-U.S.-Korea, promote cooperation for rulemaking and enhancement of autonomy of each country."<sup>26</sup> As all three countries' strategies demonstrate, a critical area for trilateral cooperation is the Indo-Pacific region.

At Camp David, the three nations committed to stand strong against the People's Republic of China (PRC) to protect the rules-based order and promote peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region. They clearly stated their opposition to the PRC's attempts to change the status quo of the South China Sea, including illegal maritime territorial claims, militarization of reclaimed areas, unregulated fishing, and provocative use of its maritime militias.<sup>27</sup> This marked the first time the ROK, along with the United States and Japan, mentioned the PRC by name in a trilateral document relating to unlawful maritime activities.

Moreover, they emphasized a firm commitment to freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea and to manage the regional threats posed by the PRC to maintain a free maritime order. To keep the peace and stability of the Taiwan Strait, the three leaders decided to deter any activities that could threaten the security of the strait. At the same time, each of the three will work with China to avoid a possible outbreak of conflict in the region.

In line with the above regional commitments, the three leaders agreed to the previously mentioned "commitment to consult," emphasizing that information sharing, synchronization of messages, and coordination of response actions must be carried out in response to regional challenges, provocations, and threats. Although the commitment differs from the concept of collective security in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and does not supersede or infringe upon existing commitments arising from the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between Japan and the United States or the Mutual Defense Treaty between the ROK and the United States, it could serve as a guideline for the three countries to promote new levels of cooperation and consultation.

Furthermore, given that the commitment to consult would require frequent meetings, the three leaders specified at Camp David that they would not only continue to hold annual leader-level summit meetings but also annual meetings for the foreign ministers, defense ministers, and heads of the National Security Office, as well as annual meetings between the ministers of finance and commerce and industry. The commitment to erect a whole-of-government and regularized consultative architecture was a bold move given the difficulty of holding such meetings on an annual basis. In doing so, the three nations will be able to jointly handle various threats and issues that cross multiple functional areas.

The leaders also launched the annual Trilateral Indo-Pacific Dialogue to identify areas of cooperation and jointly respond to threats in the Indo-Pacific region. Through the dialogue, they can manage regional issues and identify new areas of cooperation. In addition, the three will work together in non-traditional security areas, such as strengthening the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). The framework, composed of 14 nations representing 40 percent of global GDP, aims to “offer tangible benefits that fuel economic activity and investment, promote sustainable and inclusive economic growth, and benefit workers and consumers across the region.”<sup>28</sup> This shows that trilateral cooperation is embedded within a broader array of multilateral efforts in the region.

Finally, in addition to committing to maintain the rules-based order and build an array of new consultative mechanisms, the three leaders committed to closely work with ASEAN. ASEAN is an important regional grouping for both security and economic issues, particularly in the areas of sustainable energy, water security, and climate resilience. Therefore, the three leaders stated they “wholeheartedly reaffirm ASEAN centrality and unity” in the region.<sup>29</sup> They also committed to working with the Pacific Island countries. China and the Solomon Islands recently upgraded their relations to a “comprehensive strategic partnership” and have signed a police cooperation pact.<sup>30</sup> Given the broader context of US-China rivalry and strategic competition, the United States views boosting relations with the Pacific Islands as a critical objective.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, the ROK and Japan view the Pacific Islands as important partners. During his hosting of the Korea-Pacific Islands Summit in May 2023, President Yoon said, “Let the ROK, which stands for the universal values of freedom, human rights, and rule of law, foster a sustainable cooperative partnership based on mutual respect and trust with Pacific island nations that share a vision for peace and democracy.”<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs states, “it is important for Japan to strive for a further improvement of friendly



relations with the Pacific Islands Countries” given their shared history, the island’s importance as a source of food and natural resources for Japan, and the fact that the islands are located along important maritime transport routes for Japanese trade.<sup>33</sup>

### *Peninsular Level Commitments*

In conjunction with both global and regional issues, trilateral security cooperation will focus on deterring DPRK threats. In this regard, the commitments made at Camp David build upon previously described efforts under TCOG, TISA, and the DTT – the main objectives of which had been to deter DPRK provocations. As noted, the recent increase in security cooperation among the three has been driven by the DPRK’s rapidly increasing provocations, including more than 70 missile launch tests in 2022.<sup>34</sup> North Korea’s ability to launch various missiles, including medium- and long-range missiles and a recent satellite launch, alarmed the three nations and propelled them to coordinate their responses.

At Camp David, the three leaders condemned the “DPRK’s unprecedented number of ballistic missile launches, including multiple intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) launches and conventional military actions that pose a grave threat to peace and security on the Korean Peninsula and beyond.”<sup>35</sup> Notably, to effectively deter DPRK provocations, the three leaders also set goals to “operationalize [their] sharing of missile warning data on the DPRK in real-time” by the end of 2023.

Along with committing to tighten real-time data-sharing to better deter and respond to North Korean provocations, the three leaders agreed to hold annual, named, multi-domain trilateral exercises to enhance “coordinated capabilities and cooperation.” The drive to develop multi-domain exercises follows the US military’s strategy to dramatically evolve its multi-domain operations in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.<sup>36</sup> The aim of trilateral, multi-domain exercises would be to enhance the joint capability and interoperability of the three forces to deter an advancing and increasingly multifaceted DPRK threat.

The three leaders also announced the establishment of a new trilateral working group to drive cooperation, “including with the international community, to combat DPRK cyber threats and block its cyber-enabled sanctions evasion.” The DPRK has increasingly used cyber-means to earn foreign currency to develop its nuclear and missile programs, a vicious cycle that needs to be

ceased. The three leaders also reasserted their commitment to the complete denuclearization of the DPRK. In doing so, they committed to work through the UN to push the DPRK to abandon its nuclear and ballistic missile programs while agreeing to conduct dialogue with the DPRK with no preconditions and working to promote human rights in the country.

The three leaders also sought to “further enhance trilateral dialogue on space security cooperation, particularly regarding threats in the space domain, national space strategies, and the responsible use of space.” Theoretically, there are no friends or enemies in space. In this regard, space cooperation is something that the three nations could preemptively discuss. There are infinite possibilities for cooperation, including working together in non-traditional security areas, namely removing space debris. On the traditional security front, with applications to the DPRK and beyond, military cooperation can be achieved in launching and maintaining reconnaissance satellites. Various strategic communication channels could strengthen cooperation on regional threats and challenges.

### **Progress Following Camp David and Areas for Improvement**

The global, regional, and peninsular-level commitments established at Camp David set a clear direction for trilateral security cooperation and its implementation moving forward. However, it is important to note that all three parties have had to approach the outlined commitments and objectives in a deliberate manner. Without thorough planning and cautious implementation, the newfound efforts might repeat mistakes made in the past. Nevertheless, the five summit meetings held in the past one and a half years demonstrate a strong intent to maintain progress.

It has only been slightly over half a year since the Camp David Summit. Consequently, it is somewhat premature to discuss concrete accomplishments, not only because of the broad range of commitments made but also because of the constantly evolving security landscape. As this section shows, while some commitments have seen meaningful progress, others have not. In addition to charting some of the progress made, the following section notes areas for further improvement.

#### ***Real-Time Sharing of DPRK Missile Data***

To establish the complex system required to share DPRK missile data in real-time, there must be close communication among the ROK, US, and Japanese militaries. Each country's military needs to agree on when and how to deliver

the warning information. Most importantly, the three should agree on the scope and level of information they share. In this regard, domestic politics becomes a critical variable that the leaders will need to consider. In Japan, part of the public is hesitant to share their critical military information with the ROK. The same goes for the ROK. Due to territorial and historical issues, there remains political distrust between the two nations, which may complicate the mechanism for sharing critical military information.

Nonetheless, despite such difficulties, the three nations officially activated the mechanism of sharing DPRK missile-warning data in real-time in December 2023.<sup>37</sup> Although the scope and level of information that is being shared is not public, it is both technically and politically a significant achievement upon which future cooperation can be built. This mechanism is certainly a big step forward from TISA, yet work remains to be done.

The three militaries must continue to improve the data-sharing mechanism. When the DPRK launched an intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM) in January, the data analyses from the ROK and US militaries differed from the Japanese Self-Defense Forces' analysis.<sup>38</sup> The three should closely communicate to improve accuracy and align messaging. In doing so, they should work on communication and troubleshoot ways to improve the mechanism through consistent and open communication. Unless an alliance is formed, it is difficult for sovereign states to discuss sensitive information and intelligence and integrate data. Therefore, the three need to continue to work to find an ideal state for sharing DPRK missile data in real time. The quality and quantity of the information shared between the three is expected to improve moving forward.

### *Annual Trilateral Meetings and Exercises*

Several developments can be seen with respect to annual meetings and exercises. As for high-ranking official meetings, the three defense ministers met at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting in November 2023 and recently in Brazil, where they talked about the DPRK's growing threat and the PRC's increasingly provocative actions in the region.<sup>39</sup> The leaders of the three countries' national security councils also met last December to discuss the implementation of the Camp David Summit, including combined exercises and respective schedules. Notably, there have been four military exercises so far. Two trilateral aerial exercises took place in the Indo-Pacific region in October and December 2023 to strengthen the interoperability of the three forces.<sup>40</sup> More recently, they held two trilateral maritime exercises in which the ROK and Japan sent Aegis destroyers, and the United States sent the Carl Vinson aircraft carrier to deter and strengthen defense against the DPRK's increasing threat.<sup>41</sup>

Moving ahead, the three nations should invest more in and regularize multi-domain trilateral military exercises. During and since the Camp David Summit, Biden has commented that the three leaders agreed to “launch annual multi-domain military exercises to bring trilateral defense cooperation.”<sup>42</sup> Again, the US military is still developing multi-domain concepts and operations, so working with allies to do so adds additional hurdles. Nevertheless, since the three leaders have insisted on multi-domain exercises, trilateral ground exercises are expected. Strengthening the interoperability of the three militaries is an important task, especially to deter DPRK conventional and nuclear provocations. In this regard, the three would also need to work toward trilateral anti-submarine warfare exercises and cooperate on relief missions for humanitarian disasters in the region.

### *Indo-Pacific Dialogue*

The inaugural Trilateral Indo-Pacific Dialogue was hosted by the United States in January 2024 to honor the commitments made at Camp David. Representatives from each country condemned the DPRK’s development of nuclear and missile technologies and expressed the importance of maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. They also discussed the importance of cooperating closely with ASEAN and Pacific Island countries.<sup>43</sup>

The representatives emphasized the maritime-security capabilities of ASEAN and Pacific Island countries by establishing a three-country maritime security cooperation framework. This means strengthening maritime security among the three countries from the Western Indian Ocean to the South Pacific. In particular, the Pacific Islands have been a strategic region since World War II. Cooperation among the three must consider the perspective of ASEAN and Pacific Island countries. Not all ASEAN and Pacific Island countries value democracy and liberalism pursued by the ROK, the United States, and Japan. Therefore, to promote cooperation, the three countries should take a cautious approach.

### *Space Cooperation*

In terms of space cooperation, the ROK and Japanese militaries participated in the Global Sentinel, which took place at Vandenberg Air Force Base in early February to actualize what was discussed during Camp David.<sup>44</sup> Unlike the abovementioned trilateral cooperation efforts, space cooperation is a long-term commitment among the three countries. In this regard, ROK-US space cooperation can be the stepping stone for future trilateral cooperation in space. After Camp David, the ROK launched two satellites with US

assistance. In December 2023, the ROK's first reconnaissance satellite was launched by a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket, which will enhance ROK reconnaissance capacity over the DPRK.<sup>45</sup>

In April, the ROK's second reconnaissance satellite was launched from the Kennedy Space Center, which will further improve the ROK's independent surveillance capability over the DPRK. With the assistance of SpaceX, the ROK will launch more satellites by 2025.<sup>46</sup> The ROK's space capability, assisted by the United States, will not only improve its 3K Defense System (i.e., Kill Chain, Korea Air Missile Defense (KAMD), Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPR)) but will also contribute to trilateral security cooperation.

Space cooperation between the United States and Japan has made some progress as well. In his recent official visit to Washington DC, Prime Minister Kishida discussed various agenda items for Japan-US space cooperation with President Biden. The highlight was the signing of a Lunar Surface Exploration Implementing Arrangement. In this regard, Japan will "provide and sustain operation of a pressurized lunar rover while the United States plans to allocate two astronaut flight opportunities to the lunar surface for Japan on future Artemis missions."<sup>47</sup> If realized, it will be the first time that a non-American astronaut lands on the Moon. Although space cooperation is committed bilaterally for now, the two bilateral platforms will be the foundation for trilateral space cooperation in the future.

### *Trilateral Cooperation at the UN: North Korea and Beyond*

As mentioned during the Camp David Summit, the three nations should closely work together within the UN system to promote peace and prosperity in the region and the world. The ROK and Japan have been elected as non-permanent members of the UNSC, marking the third time that the ROK has filled this role. During its tenure, which will conclude in 2025, "the ROK intends to strengthen its role as a responsible member of the international community that defends the rules-based international order and universal values enshrined in the UN Charter."<sup>48</sup> The ROK, Japan, and the United States, the one permanent UNSC member among them, could pursue various agendas in the UN, including on DPRK-related issues.

The three nations should call for the complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement (CVID) of the DPRK's nuclear program. The acronym, CVID, has not been used for the past few years. At Camp David, the three leaders agreed to remain "committed to dialogue with the DRPK with no precondition."<sup>49</sup> CVID

should be the term that the three nations use regarding the denuclearization of the DPRK, especially at the UN. China and Russia will likely wield veto power in an attempt to “resist whatever the US brings to the table when it comes to North Korea.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, both condemning and sanctioning the DPRK will be challenging. However, as members of the Security Council, the ROK, and Japan can use their diplomatic power to prepare initiatives that direct like-minded countries in the UN to strengthen their commitments to upholding peace and stability.

Although the ROK and Japan’s tenure at the UNSC is limited, they can work to establish new norms and institutions regarding the DPRK’s denuclearization. According to the life cycle of norms, once a norm emerges, it can be cascaded and eventually internalized.<sup>51</sup> In this light, pushing for CVID regarding the DPRK could develop into a norm with UN support. The three partners may be able to rally like-minded nations in the UN to support the DPRK’s CVID, creating a snowball effect in which large numbers of UN members internalize CVID as a norm.

Camp David helped clarify the direction and mechanisms for security cooperation among the ROK, the United States, and Japan. The three countries are working together to establish a system for policy coordination toward the DPRK and to strengthen the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region, consisting of regular high-level dialogues and trilateral military exercises. In the face of new regional and global threats, the three can exchange opinions and coordinate responses through various channels.

### **Persistent and Future Challenges to Trilateral Security Cooperation**

Despite the progress charted above and suggestions for future improvement, there remain key challenges that could stand in the way of progressing trilateral security cooperation. These challenges include the international security environment and domestic politics. On the international security front, trilateral cooperation among China, Russia, and the DPRK – the so-called Northern Triangle – could work against ROK-US-Japan trilateral cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. DPRK leader Kim Jong-un’s recent outreach to Russian President Vladimir Putin has boosted the Russia-DPRK partnership since their August 2023 summit meeting.<sup>52</sup> According to the ROK defense minister, the DPRK sent “millions of artillery shells to Russia since the summit.”<sup>53</sup>

In return, Russia is expected to provide the DPRK with food, fuel, and medicine, supplies of which have dwindled due to the COVID-19 lockdown in the DPRK. Although the DPRK’s two satellite launches in 2023 failed, a recent launch succeeded.<sup>54</sup> Putin may have helped Kim Jong-un with “satellite technology,

and possibly technology for space-launched vehicles, which could include ICBM technology.” Also, it is possible that Russia could provide DPRK with technology for nuclear-powered submarines.<sup>55</sup>

This newly built axis likely alarms China. Traditionally, the DPRK sought Chinese support for economic reasons and Russia for military reasons. If China falls into the trap of the Northern Triangle, there will be reputational costs, which could undermine its ability to normalize relations with the United States and mitigate the global trend of economic decoupling. Alternatively, China could have a different strategic calculus, where it wants the DPRK and Russia to cooperate on undermining the US sphere of influence in the region. If so, the United States, which is currently confronting simultaneous conflicts in Europe and the Middle East, would face even steeper security challenges, eventually affecting and potentially jeopardizing trilateral cooperation.

To avoid any confrontation with a possible Northern Triangle, the United States, the ROK, and Japan needs to maintain bilateral and multilateral relations with China. At the recent US-China dialogue at APEC, President Biden and President Xi Jinping met for several hours, marking “a significant step forward in the bilateral relationship, given its fraught state.”<sup>56</sup> Moreover, the ROK-Japan-China Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) is expected to hold a summit meeting in May 2024.<sup>57</sup> Considering that the most recent trilateral summit was held in 2019, it will be a venue where three neighbors seek more productive cooperation in the region and work to prevent a possible collision of triangular blocs.

In addition to a rapidly evolving international security environment, domestic politics is also a critical variable to consider when promoting trilateral cooperation. If Biden is reelected in the 2024 US presidential election, the current momentum and direction for trilateral cooperation would likely continue. The Biden administration initiated the Camp David Summit and has maintained a consistent stance on trilateral cooperation. Considering that the Biden administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategy focuses on strengthening multilateralism, the United States will actively lead trilateral cooperation. If Trump is elected, trilateral cooperation has the potential to continue, but other factors at play could undermine future progress.

During his first term, Trump supported trilateral cooperation. During the ROK-US-Japan trilateral summit meeting in September 2017, Trump expressed the view that “amid the growing threat of North Korea threat, coordination among the United States, Japan, and the ROK is definitely deepening.”<sup>58</sup> However, if Trump, based on his America-First credo, threatens to reduce or even pull

troops out of the ROK or Japan, trilateral cooperation would become extremely complicated. However, trilateral cooperation could be sustained if Trump believes such an arrangement benefits US national interests.

Although not visible yet, there could also be an issue emerging from Japanese domestic politics. The Kishida Cabinet's approval rating is at 26 percent while the disapproval rating is 66 percent.<sup>59</sup> It is a record low. If the approval ratings continue to fall, there is a chance that trilateral cooperation could be affected as well. In other words, the Japanese public may not be comfortable with Kishida's foreign policy agenda, including the strengthening of trilateral cooperation. Yet, after the recent US-Japan summit meeting, Kishida and Yoon talked over the phone and discussed deepening bilateral cooperation and trilateral cooperation with the United States. In this regard, the foreign policy direction of Japan regarding trilateral cooperation has been strongly reaffirmed.

Finally, while the Camp David Summit was a turning point that gave a huge boost to trilateral cooperation, it does not change the reality that the ROK remains the weak link in the security triangle. Given its somewhat different geopolitical framework situated on the Asian mainland next to the DPRK, its economic trade dependencies on China, and its historical issues with Japan, the debate over trilateral cooperation, widely aired by progressives within South Korea, is more palpable than in the United States or Japan. However, despite the defeat of the ruling party in ROK's recent parliamentary election, an ROK foreign ministry official said there will be "no significant impact on its foreign policy line, including trilateral cooperation with the United States and Japan."<sup>60</sup>

All three countries will continue to face diverse domestic and international challenges to trilateral cooperation. Camp David summit was a political commitment among the three leaders. Now the three parties need to institutionalize trilateral cooperation to manage those challenges. Institutionalization of the trilateral security cooperation requires legal measures. Ideally, each country's legislative body could introduce and ratify the institutionalization of such cooperation as legally binding cooperative measures, which would help mitigate the effects of domestic politics on trilateral cooperation. Furthermore, the three can continue to deal with challenges derived from the international security environment by sustaining the annual dialogues and regular military exercises discussed at Camp David.



## Conclusion

In the past, trilateral cooperation failed due to deteriorating bilateral relations between the ROK and Japan, the changing security environment, and the domestic politics of the three nations. The key now is to institutionalize trilateral cooperation, having learned such lessons from the past. At this point, the most significant goal for trilateral cooperation is sustainability. Exploring, developing, and carrying on agendas will continue. But without sustainability, none of them will be meaningful. At Camp David, the agenda was regularized. It should now be institutionalized.

Against this backdrop, it would be desirable to establish a ROK-US-Japan Cooperation Secretariat to sustain cooperation.<sup>61</sup> First, regardless of the dynamic security landscape and changing domestic politics, the secretariat could ensure the three nations are tied together. NATO and ASEAN, the most renowned multilateral frameworks, run secretariat functions. Second, the secretariat could serve as a planning board for coordinating the annual leader-level summits and ministerial meetings for foreign ministers, defense ministers, national security advisors, and treasury ministers.

Third, the secretariat can also manage the logistics and scheduling of multi-domain trilateral exercises. The three militaries have conducted trilateral exercises but not across multiple domains. Each government can deploy liaison officers to the secretariat to coordinate multi-domain exercises. Fourth, the secretariat should review the results of meetings and exercises and provide qualitative and quantitative suggestions for improvements. This function should work well as a watchdog. Lastly, the secretariat should also be able to present new areas of cooperation. For trilateral cooperation to endure, it is important to adjust to new environments. The institutionalization of cooperation will be necessary on this account, and it is best done by establishing a secretariat, which could help to prevent domestic factors from interfering with trilateral cooperation in the future.

The level of motivation to sustain and strengthen this cooperation among the three leaders may be different, and the direction of cooperation may differ despite common aspirations at Camp David. For the time being – from a South Korean perspective – it will be wise for the three leaders to primarily focus on its traditional agenda, namely, the DPRK. At this moment, institutionalization of cooperation is needed. It will be best done by establishing a secretariat to help navigate the inevitable domestic shifts ahead.

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