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Trilateralism in the Wake of the 2022 Jolt Toward Bipolarity in the Indo-Pacific and World

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Over the course of the first two decades of the 21st century, trilateralism rose to levels not seen previously.¹ Russia, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (ROK) all explored triangular frameworks to position themselves at the pivot of great power relations in Northeast Asia or the broader Indo-Pacific region. By 2024, however, the contours of trilateralism had shifted to reinforce bipolarity. The United States reasserted its leadership role in advancing the troubled US-Japan-ROK triangle, and Russia leaped ahead of China in pressing for the socialist legacy triangle of China-North Korea-Russia. Meanwhile, the desire for relations beyond the lines of a bipolar region, i.e., the US-China-ROK triangle, continues to have a following in Seoul despite President Yoon Suk-yeol's overall support for the forces leading to bipolarity. Here, I explore how trilateralism has been transformed in the Indo-Pacific region over a two-year period from 2022 to 2024. The focus is Northeast Asia, setting aside AUKUS and the recent US-Japan-Philippines triangle.

A booming US-Japan-ROK relationship is the centerpiece of the pursuit of triangular solidarity. Was the breakthrough reached at the trilateral summit at Camp David the long-sought answer? How has it changed the state of triangularity? This introductory essay differentiates three dimensions (i.e., military security, economic security, and national identity gaps), reviews the nature of increased triangularity in the period leading up to 2022, and assesses the collective impact of US President Joe Biden, Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio, and South Korean President Yoon on the triangular relationship. The presentation proceeds across six sections. Section one explains the framework for analyzing triangularity. Section two looks back at the heyday of triangularity prior to the 2020s. In Section three, the focus turns to transformative forces supportive of greater bipolarity that emerged in 2021 and intensified after Russia's full-scale assault against Ukraine. Section four concentrates on the triangularity achieved through the Camp David Summit between the United States, Japan, and the ROK. Section five explores internal and external challenges to this triangle. Finally, the concluding section sums up the arguments and reflects on the framework.

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The Framework for Analyzing Triangularity in International Relations

Analyzing trilateral relations should proceed by considering the type of triangularity being sought and the dimensions driving the pursuit of the objectives. Three types stand out in recent dynamics in the Indo-Pacific: 1) the alliance triangle, constructed by bringing together two bilateral alliances, even if a three-way alliance remains a bridge too far; 2) the triangular pivot, building on a strong bilateral link to tighten ties to a country that is not part of the same camp (the country in the pivot is closer to the other two than they are to each other); and 3) the outreach triangle, which involves two countries reaching out to a third country to serve as a strong partner in forging a minilateral bloc in a polarizing environment. All three have been found in the Indo-Pacific, but type two has faded as types one and three gain more ground. In subsequent sections, I review the heyday of type two to 2020 before focusing on type one. As for the third type, it leads us away from Northeast Asia and warrants separate analysis elsewhere, e.g., in recent US-Japan outreach efforts to India.

It is helpful to differentiate the three dimensions driving countries to alter trilateral frameworks. They can be illustrated with reference to the aspiring US-Japan-ROK alliance triangle. Analysis of the state of triangularity would be incomplete without all three of these dimensions. The longstanding rationale for boosting triangular ties has been *security threats*, which have reached unprecedented levels in the region since the time of the Korean War 70 years ago. As earlier in history, deterrence and readiness for military conflict stand first in triangular motivations. A second dimension has risen to the forefront as economic complementarity inducements have been replaced with *economic vulnerability* alarms. Warnings of supply cutoffs, the seepage of critical technologies through uncontrolled exports, and insufficient build-up of vital capacities reverberate in recent appeals for economic security to bolster military security. Attention only to those two dimensions would not capture the state of triangularity without the addition of *national identity gaps*. Even amidst efforts to showcase shared democratic and universal values, awareness of the hold of historical memories lingers in Japan-ROK relations, complicating the quest for mutual trust. In other triangular settings, different elements of national identity may trump historical memory. Of course, in both alliance and outreach triangles, democracy versus authoritarianism is on display.

The articles in this issue explore both the security and economic dimensions of triangularity. Although they do not directly invoke themes of national identity, apart from concern in South Korea that history is still an important factor in the US-Japan-ROK triangle, there is no mistaking the looming force of identity

gaps with China, Russia, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the evolution of this alliance triangle. In Sections four and five of this essay, which discuss the Camp David Summit and its limits, all of these dimensions are raised. In Section two on the heyday of triangular maneuvering, their combined impact is also analyzed.

The shift to forging alliance triangles gathered steam as US-China relations cratered by 2020 and received a powerful impetus from 2022 when the world split on how to respond to Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine. Acutely dependent on China, Russia discarded lingering hopes to be a triangular pivot in Asia, while exploring with North Korea a possible alliance triangle if China concurred. Deeply alarmed that today's Ukraine would become tomorrow's Taiwan, Japan cast aside diplomacy that conceivably could have led it to become a triangular pivot, as it eyed alliance triangles with the United States and urged its key ally to pursue outreach triangles as well. In the biggest turnabout of all, South Korea's conservative President Yoon Suk-yeol eschewed previous South Korean quests to become a triangular pivot, overriding diplomacy with North Korea in favor of a tightening US-led triangle including Japan, to the consternation of South Korean progressives, but bereft of the word "alliance."

US efforts to solidify the alliance triangle with Japan and South Korea combine an expansive view of the shared security threat, an overdue approach to the dangers of ignoring economic security, and a concerted quest for overcoming historical issues while prioritizing democracy and shared universal values. Such efforts reached fruition after South Koreans elected a conservative president in 2022, when the United States had a president committed to this combination of objectives and when external conditions made these efforts imperative for all but those immune to reconsideration.

The US government and foreign policy specialists have repeatedly expressed frustration over unrealized aspirations for a triangular relationship that builds on the bilateral US alliances with Japan and South Korea. Whether it is the continuing threat of North Korea's military, the build-up in the Russian Far East of Russian armed forces, the rise of China as a threat to military and economic security, or signs of a Northern Triangle combining their potential threats, Washington has urged its allies in Northeast Asia to draw closer together and to welcome strong triangular relations.

The residue of the quest for a pivotal triangle does not simply fade away. A comparison of Japan and South Korea on all three dimensions is instructive on how differences have continued to operate even after the fundamental

turning point of 2022. One critical distinction is the place of China in security, economic vulnerability, and national identity for the two countries. This is manifested in somewhat divergent thinking about the Camp David process and its degree of sustainability.

The Heyday of the Triangular Pivot

Despite much talk of US unipolarity following the end of the Cold War, liberation from the tight strictures of US-Soviet bipolarity freed states to explore various types of multipolarity. Seoul basked in “diplomatic diversification” to rally states behind its leading role in pursuing peninsular reunification. Given its continued reliance on the US-ROK alliance, this mostly took the form of triangles inclusive of Washington. Tokyo eagerly eyed its “return to Asia,” building on postwar initiatives dominated by economic interests to pursue political leadership as well. Keeping its alliance anchor with Washington, it too prioritized triangular arrangements in East Asia before widening its lens to Australia and India. Reemerging from its nadir after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow explored triangularity in Asia across nearly two decades.²

In each case, Beijing drew the most diplomatic attention both as the partner of choice and as a rising, asymmetrical power that best be balanced. In the 1990s, triangular maneuvering existed in embryonic forms, with Beijing serving as a target of opportunity more than an object for balancing. In the 2000s, triangular initiatives exploded into view as Beijing acquired a mixed status as a partner and a source of alarm. Finally, in the 2010s, the phenomenon of seeking to be a triangular pivot reached its apogee just as bipolarity made a comeback, gradually exposing the unshakable limits to such triangular maneuvering. US-China competition had begun to overwhelm the quest for a more autonomous position by Seoul, Tokyo, and Moscow by the end of the decade. Seoul struggled to deny this diminished role, Tokyo kept faint hope that the inevitable could be reversed, and Moscow grasped for an end run around this outcome via war in Europe.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in, Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, and Russian President Vladimir Putin were reluctant to abandon hopes of a pivotal role in Asia’s balance of power. Kim Jong-un’s rejection of Moon from 2019 did not mean that Moon let his hopes die before his presidential term ended in 2022, but the handwriting was on the wall as he yielded, in stages, to Biden’s appeals for bipolarity as the only option. Abe left office in 2020 clinging to his “honeymoon” with Putin and a planned state visit from Xi Jinping, although he simultaneously pressed US leaders toward bipolar Indo-Pacific

policies.³ Of the three champions of pivotal triangles, only Putin clung to this approach, widening the aperture to Europe as he abandoned hope of influencing Xi's agenda in Asia.

In my 2022 monograph, I argued that "East Asian triangles share an unusual mixture of three distinct elements: deep-seated security mistrust, extraordinary economic interdependence, and a combustible combination of historical resentments and civilizational confidence...The legacy of communism, the pursuit of reunification on the Korean Peninsula, and moves to expand beyond the US-Japan alliance have all driven the way triangles have evolved."⁴ In the 2020s, as US-China bipolarity was gaining ground, triangularity lost salience when it went against the grain of this emerging framework. The US-Japan-ROK triangle now thrives after languishing until then. In the reasons for its troubled journey before 2022, we can find lessons for staying on course today.

Why had the US-Japan-ROK triangle stumbled more in the 2010s than in the 1990s or 2000s? Contrasting aspirations for pivotal status in triangularity provide a key part of the explanation. South Korea aspired to be the pivot of regional transformation for roughly three decades prior to 2022, but never more than under Park Geun-hye, who proposed the Northeast Asia Peace and Security Initiative (NAPSI) and attempted to combine a close alliance with the Obama administration with a "honeymoon" relationship with Xi Jinping in China, and under Moon Jae-in, who orchestrated diplomacy between Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump to situate South Korea in the middle of a transformative triangle.⁵ The presumptive surge in the US-Japan-ROK triangle in the face of rising US-China tensions did not occur amid the pursuit of these alternate triangular interests. Japan's interest in forging triangular frameworks also did not prioritize South Korea. Abe Shinzo pursued a "honeymoon" with Vladimir Putin and ended his time in office focused on summitry with Xi Jinping, even as he sought to broaden the alliance with the United States to a triangle with Australia or even a Quad expanding to India.⁶ This was not an atmosphere conducive to US-Japan-ROK closeness, nor did Donald Trump advance it.

Diplomatic initiatives across emerging lines of bipolarity rested on illusions steeped in national identity. South Korean progressives misjudged the importance of inter-Korean diplomatic ties to North Korean elites preoccupied with regime survival. They allowed an obsession with a unified Korean Peninsula to color their perceptions. Abe's family legacy put a high premium on recovering islands seized by the Soviet Red Army in 1945 after Japan announced its surrender during World War II, as well as on a breakthrough with Moscow as one step in Japan's "return to Asia." Even when Putin had drawn the scorn of

the G7 for invading Crimea and beyond, Abe persevered. Although there was also balance of power aspirations, the difficulty of changing course, even in the late 2010s, was rooted in national identity thought.

The logic of forging an alliance triangle grew more compelling as threats intensified. The weight of historical memories was expected to fade as new generations grew accustomed to interacting with one another and South Korean democratization boosted shared values. Defying this logic proved even harder as security threats took center stage. Indeed, as Abe Shinzo normalized Japanese military activities and solidified security ties with the United States with an eye to the broader Indo-Pacific region, Moon Jae-in's narrow approach to the US-ROK alliance and caution toward rattling China and North Korea left many feeling that Seoul's ties to Washington were much less close than Tokyo's. The pressure was mounting for Seoul to change course, notably, after Pyongyang sneered at its efforts and domestic public opinion turned sharply against China's shabby treatment of South Korea through informal sanctions in 2016 accompanied by arrogant "wolf warrior" rhetoric.⁷

The pursuit of pivotal triangles proved unsustainable in the face of the unstoppable force of US-China confrontation. For a time, some blamed Donald Trump for provoking the split in a trade war based partly on protectionist notions of "fair trade" and "America First." Yet, as the Chinese response to North Korea's reversion to provocations unfolded, the pandemic originating in its own heartland expanded, and Putin's war in Ukraine intensified, the blame increasingly centered on Xi Jinping. As other leaders sought to find common ground with Xi as late as 2021, each was rebuffed, and Biden was the latest to find that military security, economic security, and identity divides were growing.

The Forces Boosting Alliance Triangularity Between 2022 and 2024

No matter how much angst had been raised about the forces of bipolarity from 2018 to 2021, the advent of war on a large scale in 2022 came as a shock, spelling the death knell of determined efforts to position one's country as a triangular pivot. In Northeast Asia, the fact that China and Russia had sided with North Korea in interpreting the breakdown of US-DPRK diplomacy left a sour taste for the United States and its allies. Both Seoul and Tokyo were chagrined by setbacks to their diplomacy with Beijing and Moscow and the intransigence of Pyongyang. The trade war between the United States and China served as a harbinger of bipolarity, followed by the COVID-19 arrogance of China that further alienated the two countries.⁸ Beginning his tenure in 2021, Biden explored managing differences with both Xi and Putin to no avail. A downward spiral had begun.

Trump's resort to a trade war, Xi Jinping's use of other countries' vulnerability to economic coercion, and the disruption of supply lines during the COVID-19 pandemic all brought economic security to the forefront. Biden went further in systemizing the thinking about how to reduce risks.⁹ Even before the massive sanctions and export controls imposed on Russia, this theme became a centerpiece in the quest to solidify alliances and resist pivotal maneuvering. Intent on keeping differences manageable, Biden sought de-risking, not decoupling, and beseeched Xi to agree to ground bilateral relations in a set of principles.¹⁰ Yet, Xi showed no inclination to find common ground.

In the second half of 2023 and the first part of 2024, attention centered on four triangles in the Indo-Pacific region. First, AUKUS remained the epitome of security collaboration, while talks were beginning for Japan to join Pillar 2, the non-nuclear pillar, and adding a fourth party to the Australia-United Kingdom-United States trilateral partnership. Second, newly solidifying at Camp David, the US-Japan-South Korea trilateral relationship signified that long-sought security collaboration in Northeast Asia that extended southward along the Pacific Ocean was finally realized. Third, meeting at the White House with US and Japanese leaders, the president of the Philippines forged a new alliance triangle in April 2024 between the three countries.¹¹ Fourth, on the other side of the regional divide, separate meetings between top officials from Russia and China and Kim Jong-un spoke to the growing possibility of an alliance triangle, although China still appeared to be wary of hardening the lines of bipolarity given North Korea's unpredictable belligerence and Russia's excessive ambitions.¹²

The Camp David Spirit and the Impetus Given to US-Japan-ROK Trilateralism

As I noted in 2022: "The way forward remained unclear before Moon's term expired in 2022, even as Abe's departure in 2020 and Biden's start in 2021 already fueled discussions of steps to break this serious impasse. Yoon won the presidency eager to improve relations with Japan as US efforts intensified—many focused first on a coalition in Asia to join that in Europe to punish Russia for its aggression in Ukraine but not without an eye toward closer security ties vs. China and North Korea, tighter coordination on economic security, and revitalized joint identity in defense of the liberal international order."¹³ The year 2022 proved to be transformative for the US-Japan-ROK triangle, and the Camp David Summit built on its momentum and gave a new boost.

As veterans of the quiet diplomatic activity that brought about the "comfort women" agreement in December 2015, officials in the Biden administration cautiously waited out Moon Jae-in before they leaped at the opportunity

presented by Yoon Suk-yeol's election in 2022. In 2021, they pressed Moon to accept new language against China's insistence, and in Moon's final weeks, Russia's full-scale assault on Ukraine prompted US calls for strong sanctions with implications for polarization, not in keeping with Moon's agenda.¹⁴ The sanctions regime, more quickly and fully embraced by the new Kishida regime, carried the seeds of trilateralism as it dove-tailed closely with economic security and supply chain efforts interwoven among the United States, Japan, and South Korea. Efforts to solidify the triangle intensified not only because of Yoon's support but also due to US policy.

Yoon recognized that Seoul's foreign policy had reached a dead-end by the end of Moon's term. Pyongyang had turned its back on Moon, ending any hope for inter-Korean diplomacy. Beijing had disavowed cooperation with Seoul on Pyongyang and turned to warnings about red lines Seoul must not cross to keep it in line. Moscow now deemed South Korea an "unfriendly nation."¹⁵ Washington beckoned for closer relations, but its determination to prioritize an Indo-Pacific framework left no choice but to cooperate more closely with Tokyo as well. Yoon grasped this reality and latched onto the US regional strategy to a considerable degree while taking the lead in resolving issues in the way of Japan-ROK trust.¹⁶ He acted bilaterally while serving the objective of trilateralism.

In 2024, four threats loom large in the Indo-Pacific: 1) North Korea's accelerating belligerence backed by nuclear weapons and improved missiles, and Chinese and Russian opposition to sanctions; 2) China's growing impatience for seizing control over Taiwan; 3) China's increased pressure on Japan in the East China Sea, centered on the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands; and 4) China's gray-zone tactics in the South China Sea, arousing more determined resistance from neighboring countries. These growing threats raise the consciousness of military security for the United States, Japan, and South Korea. In their wake, alarm has grown that non-military means of pressure could be used to further the ambitions behind such threats. China's economic clout and its past use of unofficial sanctions against both Japan and South Korea, as well as other states, are one reason that economic security is now a priority. China's obsession with acquiring advanced technologies, often dual-use, through any possible means is another reason.

The following question persists in the mid-2020s: Do the three countries share the same security threat? Washington and Tokyo increasingly do. Although Abe and Obama were not fully in sync on both Russia and China, US-Japan alignment has been extremely close under Kishida and Biden. On the contrary, Seoul and Washington did not share the same security threat for a time. Under Moon, "Seoul demurred from anything that would not only distract it from its

priority but could offend Beijing, whose cooperation was foremost. Yet when hope for China faded, Moon reinforced US ties and agreed to wording on regional issues...Under Korean conservatives, triangularity could, at times, make wider gains, but progressives usually played the national identity card more energetically and let Japan-ROK relations flounder apart from security cooperation centered on the United States and exclusively focused on North Korea.”¹⁷ The security environment grew more ominous in the 2020s, and now the consensus is greater. However, Seoul's perspective remains narrower, its wariness about drawing China's ire more obvious, and its political divides raise more uncertainty about the future.

A second compelling question on today's agenda is whether economic vulnerability leads to triangular consensus. The atmosphere under Biden shifted abruptly to coordinating on dual-use technology, export controls, and even defense industrial production. “Vulnerability to the outside drove strengthened trilateralism to limit each country's threat from China, most of all...Bipolarity poses the challenge of Washington making decoupling requests beyond what Seoul considers prudent and of Beijing imposing tough economic sanctions for what Seoul agrees to do.”¹⁸ The economic security dimension has become a prime test of this triangle. If Tokyo has rallied behind Washington's agenda, Seoul has also shifted significantly that way. Beijing still wields a powerful economic card on all three states – Seoul above all – and Washington limits its response to “de-risking” without risking the preponderance of trade or the goodwill of Tokyo and Seoul. This keeps the focus squarely on economic vulnerability to China.

National identity incompatibility poses a third challenge to US-Japan-ROK trilateral solidarity. This has long been true and still posed a challenge in the 2020s. Symbols of identity riled Japan-ROK relations, even as the shared identity of these countries with the United States received ever more recognition and the Biden administration was intent on forging a “community of democracies.” Repelled by Abe's image as a historical revisionist intent on overturning the symbols of Japan-ROK reconciliation in the 1990s, Seoul found it easier to work with Kishida. Distrustful of South Korea's sincerity after Moon scorned Abe's turnabout to reach a breakthrough on the “comfort women” issue, Tokyo finally found reassurance from Yoon. Both US allies put universal values and democracy in the forefront. Thus, the identity dimension slipped into the background as a problem for trilateralism. Yet, South Korean progressives railed against Yoon's soft approach, some Japanese conservatives sought a tougher stance, and identity gaps lingered as an issue.¹⁹

In the context of the Camp David Summit, threat perceptions diverged within the US-Japan-ROK triangle but not to the degree that their solidarity was put in doubt. Washington took all three threats seriously – China, North Korea, and Russia – and sought unity in addressing them all. Tokyo put the China threat well ahead of the others but agreed on the linkages among them and the urgency of responding to all as the goal of the Camp David process. Seoul, however, differentiated the threats more, prioritizing North Korea and relatively downgrading China and Russia, particularly in progressive thinking.

Inhibiting Forces Inside and Outside the US-Japan-ROK Triangle

Russia's aggression in Ukraine, North Korea's warnings of belligerence rather than diplomacy, Iran's attempted assault in the Middle East, and China's empowerment of this entire axis are the driving forces of our times. No US-China summit has even hinted at a reversal of this trajectory, and no US ally has found promise in its own diplomacy to put a break on this momentum. Wishful thinking endures in some circles about reviving the quest to become a triangular pivot, so it is worth paying attention to the essence of these arguments and their prospects for realization.

The core of the argument that the US-Japan-ROK triangle should not be solidified is found in South Korea, not in Japan or the United States. It rests on suspicions the United States may not have shared national interests and may entrap South Korea with its policies, persistent appeals to national identity gaps that Japan cannot be trusted as a reliable partner, and a rosy outlook on China as a greater source of stability than Sinocentric ambitions. In this worldview, the United States is less a force for stability and responding to Chinese threats to change the status quo by force, but a hegemon intent on containing China's rising influence in the Indo-Pacific. Together with China or even in a regional grouping with China and Japan, Seoul should, consequently, put a limit on its cooperation with US regional ambitions and balance against Washington no less than against Beijing's rising influence.²⁰ A security focus on North Korea rather than China feeds into this logic, shunning Taiwan and the South China Sea as matters of China's national interest.

The disparity in Japanese and South Korean commentaries on the economic price to be paid for tilting more sharply to the United States is less pronounced but striking nonetheless. In Seoul, but not Tokyo, there are frequent references to refrain: economic interests center on China, while security interests clearly rely on the United States. As economic security concerns have dictated restrictions on high-tech exchanges with China, Japan's enthusiasm has

exceeded that of South Korea. Recent Chinese signals regarding enhanced cooperation have been received more positively by a vocal minority in Seoul, as Japan fixates on China's arrest of a businessman.

The dream of a triangular pivot does not fade easily. It is least sustainable in Japan, which awoke to such unpardonable behavior from China and Russia that further optimism was unthinkable. In the late 2010s, Abe had been indulged in his wooing of Putin and pursuit of a transformative state visit from Xi Jinping despite widespread skepticism. In the post-Abe era, all hope has quickly faded. Yet, another claim to pivotal importance gained some popularity. In light of Southeast Asian countries' wariness of US "values diplomacy," Japan could serve as the bridge to the Global South with the United States.²¹ However, as weak of a substitute as this was for prior pivotal ambitions, it boosted national identity a bit.

Arguably, the biggest gap between South Korean and Japanese thinking about the triangle and China is national identity. The treatment of history's shadow centers more on China in Japan and on Japan in South Korea.²² The latter is indicative of hostility to Japan, which is inconsistent with the spirit of Camp David. Despite China's role as an enemy in the Korean War and references to "sadae" in regard to unequal treatment in imperial times, many Koreans favor using the "history card" only against Japan. They are determined to keep alive symbols of anti-Japanese historical struggles while relegating the identity gap with China to the sidelines.

Conclusion

The ascent of alliance triangles continues more than two years after Russia launched its full-scale assault on Ukraine. On one side, Moscow has drawn closer to Pyongyang, and Beijing continues to nudge closer to Moscow, backed by a surge in bilateral trade.²³ On the other side, Seoul is now embracing a triangle with Tokyo and Washington with security, economic, and even identity ties well beyond anything seen previously. Neither Seoul nor Tokyo is proceeding with aspirations for a pivotal triangle that manifested barely five years ago, although South Korean progressives have not abandoned all hope, given different thinking about China, Japan, and North Korea. In US-Japan coordination, the pursuit of outreach triangles in the Global South continues, while China-Russia coordination is less visible or even strained in similar quests for third partners.

The most conspicuous force in the shift from triangular pivots to alliance triangles is security. It played a decisive role in the transition from the 2010s to the 2020s, as threat perceptions changed dramatically. Given the huge volume

of trade between China and each member in the US-Japan-ROK triangle, it is noteworthy that economic vulnerability also played a large role and became the focal point of steps to enhance solidarity beyond deterrence and military challenges. Important, but most subject to challenge, in the build-up of momentum for an alliance triangle were national identity gaps. Donald Trump and South Korean progressives remained at odds with mainstream logic.

As many concentrate narrowly on the polarization underway, triangular analysis adds a vital perspective on the complementary process. Consolidating each bloc requires building alliances and reaching beyond them. In the Indo-Pacific region, there is no NATO-style multilateralism. Only by constructing blocs, one triangle at a time, can each side maximize its position. Security does not suffice as the glue binding states in an alliance triangle, especially in an era of high technologies critical for military and intelligence to thrive. Economic security is now, arguably, on a par with military security. Consolidating an alliance triangle also demands attention to national identity gaps. In the case of South Korean progressives, that consolidation remains a work in progress. Yet, the clashing values emanating from China, North Korea, and Russia make the case that the democratic side needs to coalesce around values and not allow historical memory to interfere. This is the position advocated by Yoon, who has raised the profile of human rights and hosted an international conference for democracy.²⁴ The Camp David spirit abounds in shared values.

Leadership matters, but the forces in support of alliance triangularity are likely to matter more. A Trump presidency would, no doubt, be disruptive, but more so in Europe than in Asia. Trump and his conservative base favor targeting China more.²⁵ This would put a strain not only on Seoul but also on Tokyo, and the two might well find common cause in pushing back against unilateral overreach – something that was inconceivable amid their strained relations during Trump's first term in office. A progressive president in South Korea from 2027 would be tempted to reverse some of Yoon's foreign policy moves, but as seen in the final year of the Moon administration, the international environment makes it difficult for Seoul to distance itself from Washington. The Camp David Summit solidified a process that is difficult to reverse, and that foundation is getting stronger; year by year, we anticipate considerable follow-up. Reversing this process appears unlikely after three more years and in the context of an increasingly polarized international and regional environment. No prospect of a pivotal triangle, especially in Northeast Asia, can be seen on the current horizon.

Endnotes

- ¹ This introduction builds on arguments presented in Gilbert Rozman, *Strategic Triangles Reshaping International Relations in East Asia* (London: Routledge, 2022). This article expands the coverage over two fateful years and takes a narrower focus centered on one of the nine triangles showcased in the book: the US-Japan-ROK triangle.
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- ¹⁴ "U.S.-ROK Leaders' Joint Statement," *The White House*, May 21, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/05/21/u-s-rok-leaders-joint-statement/>.
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- ¹⁶ "President Yoon's solution to forced labor issue hailed by the U.S., the UN and the European Union," *Office of the President*, March 7, 2023, <https://eng.president.go.kr/briefing/pQmrsdtn>.

- ¹⁷ Rozman, *Strategic Triangles Reshaping International Relations in East Asia*, 83.
- ¹⁸ Rozman, *Strategic Triangles Reshaping International Relations in East Asia*, 85.
- ¹⁹ For numerous examples, see “Country Report: Korea,” and “Country Report: Japan,” issued bi-monthly by the Asan Forum.
- ²⁰ On the recent divide between progressives and conservatives, see Eun A Jo, “Battling Partisan Narratives,” in Gilbert Rozman, Sue Mi Terry, and Eun A Jo, *South Korea’s Wild Ride: The Big Shifts in Foreign Policy, 2012-2022* (London: Routledge, 2024).
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