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Trilateralism in the Indo-Pacific

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About KEI

The Korea Economic Institute of America (KEI) is a US policy institute and public outreach organization dedicated to helping Americans understand the breadth and importance of the relationship with the Republic of Korea. Through our publications, social media, programs, and public events, KEI seeks to advance scholarship and understanding of Korea in ways that will inform policy makers and the American public of the security, economic, and political implications of our connections to the Korean Peninsula.

For more than 40 years, KEI has been promoting dialogue and understanding between the United States and the Republic of Korea through insightful and in-depth conversation and analysis. KEI draws on the expertise of its resident staff; provides a platform on which leading writers, thinkers and commentators from the United States, Korea, and third countries can share their research and opinions; promotes scholarship by commissioning and publishing original articles; and hosts public and off-the-record conversations among policy makers and opinion leaders.

KEI maintains connections with partner think tanks and with the academic community throughout the United States. Our “Korea Policy Series,” “New Academic Symposium,” and “University Programs” ensure that the best in research and scholarship on Korea are shared among experts and are available to students and the general public.

Although most of our activities take place at our Washington, D.C. headquarters, KEI is committed to going beyond the Beltway—engaging with communities across the United States to discuss how the two countries are navigating the shared challenges of our time. Programs such as the “Future of Korea,” held in partnership with the World Affairs Councils of America, and the “Ambassadors’ Dialogue” bring Korean and American diplomats to venues across the country to discuss current events and the overall US-ROK relationship.

In an increasingly digital age, KEI is committed to expanding our virtual engagement. Through our blog, “The Peninsula;” video series, “Korea in Five;” and livestreamed and recorded events on a wide variety of Korea—and transpacific issues. We are able to connect with people from across the globe who are interested in Korea.

The US partnership with the Republic of Korea is built on enduring values and interests, but it cannot be taken for granted. The bonds between the two nations are maintained through the efforts of diplomats, service members, scholars, students, artists, and everyday Americans and Koreans. KEI is dedicated to contributing to this undertaking—helping to ensure a safer and more prosperous world.

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Preface

The Korea Economic Institute (KEI) is pleased to issue Vol. 2, Issue 1 of its new flagship journal, *Korea Policy*. Our new journal carries forward the objective and spirit of KEI's previous publications, the Academic Paper Series' (APS) On Korea publication, and the Joint US-Korea Academic Studies publication. Like our previous publications, *Korea Policy* identifies and explores the array of security, economic and political issues and policy trends related to Korea and the US-Korea alliance. The journal offers academically rigorous and policy-relevant research.

Korea Policy papers are written by academic scholars and policy experts from the United States, South Korea, and around the globe. The objective is to provide opportunities for recognized specialists and new voices to present fresh research and innovative thinking on Korea, the region, and related international issues. Each issue covers a broad, unifying theme and is arranged into two sections of articles. Before publication, the articles in the first section are presented as working papers at hybrid panel events in partnership with universities around the country. The articles in the second section are presented as part of our *Korea Policy* series at KEI's Washington, DC office.

The papers in Vol. 2, Issue 1 exemplify the breadth and depth of policy issues relevant to Korea and the US-Korea alliance. They are original pieces written exclusively for this issue over the last six months. KEI distributes the final publication to individuals in governments, the private sector, policy institutes, and educational communities around the world, and features the digital publication on the KEI website for the broader public.

Contributions in this issue fall under the theme: Trilateralism in the Indo-Pacific. The first section explores US-Japan-South Korea trilateral cooperation on security and developmental policy. The second section examines key triangular relationships in the region beyond US-Japan-South Korea trilateral. These include South Korea-US-Vietnam; South Korea-US-Indonesia; South Korea-Japan-China; and North Korea-Russia-China trilateral relations.

For over 40 years, KEI has produced objective and informative analyses and highlighted important policy research on Korea. I hope you find this volume of *Korea Policy* to be a useful contribution.



Scott Snyder
President and CEO
Korea Economic Institute of America
May 2024

Section 1

From Security Threats to Development Policy: US-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Relations



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

By Gil Rozman

Introduction

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.

Dr. Gilbert Rozman is the Emeritus Musgrave Professor of Sociology and the editor-in-chief of The Asan Forum, a bi-monthly, online journal on international relations in the Indo-Pacific region. This paper was finalized in mid-May 2024.

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

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

By Alex Soohoon Lee

Introduction

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.¹ 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.² 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.³ 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.⁴

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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."⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷

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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰

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.¹¹ 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.¹²

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.¹³ 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.¹⁴

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.¹⁵ The “Camp David Principles” established several basic principles to promote trilateral cooperation.¹⁶ 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.”¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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.”¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.”²¹ 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.²² 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.”²³ 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."²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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."²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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.”²⁸ 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.²⁹ 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.³⁰ 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.³¹

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.”³² 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.³³

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 2022.³⁴ 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.”³⁵ 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.³⁶ 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 2023.³⁷ 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.³⁸ 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.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹

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.”⁴² 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.⁴³

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.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵

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 2025.⁴⁶ 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."⁴⁷ 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."⁴⁸ 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."⁴⁹ 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.”⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹ 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.⁵² According to the ROK defense minister, the DPRK sent “millions of artillery shells to Russia since the summit.”⁵³

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.⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵

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.”⁵⁶ Moreover, the ROK-Japan-China Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) is expected to hold a summit meeting in May 2024.⁵⁷ 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 minilateralism, 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.”⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹ 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."⁶⁰

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.⁶¹ 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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Camp David and US-Japan-ROK Trilateral Security and Defense Cooperation: Consolidating the Northeast Asia Anchor in the Indo-Pacific

By Yasuyo Sakata¹

Introduction

The Biden administration's national security and defense strategies have called for an aligned, coordinated, and integrated network of allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific, the Euro-Atlantic, and beyond.² The Ukraine War and its implications for the Taiwan Strait have pushed the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic partners closer. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and its four Asia-Pacific Partners (AP4), including Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea), Australia, and New Zealand, is one example. But the security architecture of alliances and partnerships is different in each theater. In the Euro-Atlantic, NATO has expanded in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In the Indo-Pacific, there is no Asian NATO, meaning a formal collective treaty alliance legally bound by mutual defense commitments. However, the traditional US-led hub-and-spokes system (the United States as the hub and the bilateral treaty alliances as spokes) is evolving into a hub-and-spokes plus system or, as some US officials have labeled, a latticework-like structure to respond to the rise of China.³ In the lattice-like structure, bilateral US treaty alliances – with the Philippines, Australia, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (ROK) – are complemented by bilateral, trilateral, and quadrilateral arrangements among treaty allies and non-treaty strategic partners such as India, Singapore, and Taiwan, in addition to European allies such as the United Kingdom (UK), France, and Germany.⁴

On the Indo-Pacific front, Japan and the United States have led the effort to rebuild the security architecture based on their Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategies from Prime Ministers Shinzo Abe, Yoshihide Suga, and Fumio Kishida with the Donald Trump and Joseph Biden administrations.⁵ The state visit by Prime Minister Kishida to Washington in April this year, which included a summit meeting with Biden and the first-ever US-Japan-Philippines trilateral summit. Another achievement was the “first-ever” stand-alone trilateral summit

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held at Camp David in August 2023 with President Biden, Prime Minister Kishida, and South Korean President Yoon Seok-yeol. The US-Japan-ROK trilateral relationship has been successfully reframed and embedded into the Indo-Pacific security architecture, and was reiterated during Prime Minister Kishida's visit to the United States and the Biden-Kishida summit, as the US-Japan Leaders' Statement highlighted Camp David and the US-Japan-ROK trilateral as part of the Indo-Pacific framework.⁶ Similarly, in his speech to the US Congress, Prime Minister Kishida articulated Japan's views on FOIP and the "multi-layered regional framework" with like-minded countries to include the ROK, the US-Japan-ROK trilateral relationship, and the Camp David Summit.⁷

The US-Japan-ROK trilateral partnership now has a place in the Indo-Pacific security architecture, along with the Quad (US-Japan-Australia-India), AUKUS (Australia-UK-US), U.S.-Japan-Australia, and the recently established US-Japan-Philippines trilateral relationship. South Korea's pivot to the Indo-Pacific made this possible. The previous Moon Jae-in administration distanced itself from the Indo-Pacific region, and thus, the US-Japan-ROK relationship was confined to addressing the North Korea issue, but the Yoon Suk-yeol administration has pivoted to the Indo-Pacific region, announced an Indo-Pacific Strategy, and expanded the scope of the trilateral relationship, acknowledged at the Camp David Summit.⁸

What's ahead for the US-Japan-ROK trilateral relationship after the Camp David Summit? How can and should the trilateral develop as part of the Indo-Pacific security architecture? As the trilateral adapts to the new security environment, the unique characteristics of each relationship should be considered, as it may enable but also constrain progress. Compared to the US-Japan-ROK trilateral, the US-Japan-Australia trilateral relationship has rapidly developed into what is often called a "quasi-alliance,"⁹ serving as a foundational hub in the Indo-Pacific. What is the US-Japan-ROK trilateral's place in the Indo-Pacific region? It has been and continues to be an indispensable pillar geographically situated in Northeast Asia. If the newly formed US-Japan-Philippines relationship can be framed as the "Southeast Asia Anchor" or "Southeast Asia Hub" with its priorities in the South China Sea and maritime Southeast Asia, the US-Japan-ROK relationship can be framed as a "Northeast Asia Anchor" or "Northeast Asia Hub" in the Indo-Pacific security architecture.¹⁰ In terms of the scope of the new US-Japan-ROK trilateral cooperation, there is much on the agenda regarding new and emerging areas of economic and technology cooperation, supply chains, and developmental cooperation. However, this article will focus on defense and security cooperation – an old but new issue – as the trilateral relationship adjusts to the Indo-Pacific security environment, which includes North Korea, the Taiwan Strait, broader maritime security issues, cybersecurity, and space.

In this article, I will first provide a brief historical overview of the origins of US-Japan-ROK defense cooperation as an anchor in Northeast Asia, i.e., the “Northeast Asia Anchor,” since the Korean War, focusing on the roles of the United Nations Command (UNC) and the US-Japan and US-ROK alliances. Then, I will explain how the Camp David Summit redefined the US-Japan-ROK trilateral as an Indo-Pacific partnership and incorporated the “Northeast Asia Anchor” into the Indo-Pacific. Finally, in the last section, I will make policy recommendations on the tasks ahead for the US-Japan-ROK partnership based on the Camp David Summit as the “Northeast Asia Anchor” in the Indo-Pacific security architecture.

Origins of the Trilateral as the “Northeast Asia Anchor”: The Korean War, the UNC, and Two Alliances

The US-Japan-ROK relationship has a long history, over seventy years since the Korean War and thirty years since the first trilateral summit held in 1994 on the sidelines of the APEC Summit. The Camp David Summit, held in August 2023, was the first stand-alone trilateral summit meeting. It was a historical diplomatic accomplishment that opened up a “new era” for the relationship.

Each trilateral arrangement is unique and bound by its historical legacies and structures. In the case of US-Japan-ROK trilateral security cooperation, it is the sum of two treaty alliances (US-Japan and US-ROK alliances) that have been connected by the UNC since the Korean War. Japan has a double security commitment to support South Korea: the US-Japan security treaty signed in 1951 and revised in 1960, namely the Far East clause, and the 1954 Status of Forces Agreements (SOFA) with UN forces, which stipulates the provision of rear-area support if a Korean contingency occurs. Japan has hosted the UNC-Rear since 1957. The US-ROK mutual defense treaty was signed in October 1953, after the Korean armistice was signed on July 27, 1953. The two alliances and the UNC/UNC-Rear are mutually reinforcing and make this trilateral arrangement unique as the Northeast Anchor.

The Korean War and the UNC/UNC-Rear: Legacy Structures “Revitalized”

The UNC is a legacy structure that continues to this day. It was established in July 1950 at the outset of the Korean War and predates the two alliance treaties signed in 1951 and 1953 respectively. Japan was under Allied occupation until the signing of the San Francisco Peace Treaty in 1951, and Japan and the ROK did not normalize diplomatic relations until 1965. Japan and the ROK did not have much agency during this period, but the creation of the UNC was the start of an indirect, trilateral security relationship led by US and multinational forces, such as the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and other UN Sending States.

After the signing of the Korean Armistice Agreement, the UNC headquarters relocated from Tokyo to Seoul (relocated to Pyeongtaek in 2018). UNC Tokyo was reconfigured as UNC-Rear at US forces in Japan (USFJ) at Zama in 1957 (then relocated to Yokota Air Base/USFJ headquarters in 2007) and presently hosts seven UNC-Rear bases (Zama, Yokosuka, Sasebo, Yokota, Kadena, Futenma, and White Beach) critical to South Korean security in the event of a contingency.¹¹ Prior to the relocation, Japan signed the UN SOFA agreement in 1954 to provide support and allow access to UNC bases in Japan for military personnel and assets of signatory countries.¹²

The UNC, a multinational military organization under the unified command of the United States, was established in July 1950 at the outset of the Korean War. Its creation was based on UN Security Council Resolution 84 and exists today to enforce the Korean armistice agreement and preserve member states' ability to fulfill combat forces and capability commitments to the ROK.¹³ Shinji Kawana referred to the UNC, including the UNC-Rear in Japan, as a "multinational quasi-alliance" structure that has become more relevant today.¹⁴

The legacy UNC structure has been "revitalized" in recent years by the US Forces in Korea (USFK). The revitalization began in 2006 in anticipation of the transfer of US-ROK Combined Forces Command (CFC) operational control and was further strengthened in 2014 through the multilateralization of headquarter elements.¹⁵ In 2018, a Canadian brigadier general became the first non-US deputy commander of the UNC, followed by Australian and UK officers. Connection with UNC-Rear was also strengthened. In 2007, the USFK started a UNC-Rear base visit program for UNC-ROK military officers to promote greater understanding of the role of the UNC, including the UNC-Rear in Japan.¹⁶ Previously, the ROK authorities were not enthusiastic about the focus on UNC, including both the conservative Park Geun-hye and the progressive Moon administrations.¹⁷ The Yoon administration, however, leaned in. President Yoon publicly acknowledged the role of the UNC and the UN bases in Japan as essential to the defense of South Korea during the 70th anniversary of the Korean Armistice and in his Liberation Day speech on August 15, 2023.¹⁸ The first UNC defense ministerial conference was held in Seoul on November 14, 2023, immediately after the 55th US-ROK Security Consultative Meeting and US-Japan-ROK defense ministerial meeting.¹⁹

Japan, which hosts the UNC-Rear, has not articulated a clear policy on its relations with the UNC. Due to the political sensitivities regarding the so-called secret "Korean Minute" of 1960, the Japanese government has kept a low stance on this issue and has not educated the public, politicians, and defense officials about Japan's UN SOFA or the UNC-Rear.²⁰ But in recent years, the Japanese

government – mainly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), which deals with the administrative affairs of the Japan-UN SOFA – has begun to articulate its policy position. Since 2018, as the North Korea issue unfolded, steps to highlight the role of the UNC were taken by UNC members and Japan.²¹ MOFA began to publish a fact sheet on Japan’s relations with the “UN Forces Korea” on its website and has been updating it periodically.²² The Enforcement Coordination Cell (ECC), a multinational headquarters based on the USS Blue Ridge (based in Yokosuka), was established in 2018 to conduct maritime surveillance of “ship-to-ship” transfers that violate UN sanctions on North Korea. Although ECC is not a UNC-based operation, UNC members and Japan participate, as UN members are obliged to observe and implement UN sanctions on North Korea.²³ Last year, Japanese Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa welcomed General Paul LaCamera, Commander of USFK, CFC, and UNC, who made a courtesy visit to Tokyo. This confirmed the role of the UNC and UNC-Rear, the surveillance of illegal ship-to-ship transfers by UNC Sending States, and the role of US-Japan-ROK trilateral cooperation.²⁴ UNC-Rear affairs are handled by MOFA, but in light of UNC revitalization, some Japanese defense and Self-Defense Forces (SDF) officers have advocated for a closer relationship between Japan and the UNC as part of Japanese defense and security policy.²⁵

The US-Japan and US-ROK Alliances and Japan-ROK Relations: A “Virtual Alliance” Since the 1990s

During the Cold War, the US-Japan and US-ROK alliances were siloed, and Japan-ROK defense ties were scarce mainly due to Japan’s hesitance to develop security relations beyond the United States and constraints from “pacifist” interpretations of its constitution. The situation has since changed after the end of the Cold War. Under the hubs-and-spokes system, the US-Japan and US-ROK alliances were strengthened, and trilateral cooperation developed, including spokes-to-spokes ties between Japan and the ROK. Trilateral cooperation, which was dubbed a “virtual alliance,” emerged with no formal military alliance and mutual defense obligations but the promotion of security cooperation among countries sharing a common ally.²⁶ The ties among the United States, Japan, and the ROK have evolved from two bilateral relationships into a trilateral one.

There are roughly three periods in which the “virtual alliance” progressed. The first period was the 1990s after the Cold War, in which the relationship was one of strategic convergence on the North Korean nuclear and missile threat, buttressed by the Clinton administration’s East Asia Strategic Initiative of strengthening alliances and trilateral cooperation. The first formal trilateral

summit among the three leaders – US President Bill Clinton, Japanese Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama, and South Korean President Kim Yong-sam – was held on the sidelines of the 1994 APEC conference amidst the nuclear crisis of 1993 and 1994 and the Agreed Framework signed that same year. The US-Japan Joint Security Declaration (1996) and the revised Defense Cooperation Guidelines (1997) focused on rear-area support in the event of a contingency on the Korean Peninsula. In 1994, the ROK defense minister visited Japan for the first time, and working-level defense talks began. The first bilateral Japan-ROK search-and-rescue exercises were held in 1999.²⁷ In 1998, the Japan-Korea Joint Declaration for Future-Oriented Partnership was signed between Japanese Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo and South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, and the first Japan-ROK security dialogue among defense officials was agreed upon. On the trilateral front, the Trilateral Coordinating Oversight Group (TCOG) on North Korean policy was established in 1999. But TCOG was crisis-driven and hinged on the Agreed Framework, which ended in 2003.

The second period of progress in bilateral and trilateral security cooperation was in the 2010s in response to the Obama administration's Pivot to Asia, or the Rebalance Strategy.²⁸ Both the US-Japan and US-ROK alliances were buttressed. The Lee Myung-bak administration was keen on revitalizing the US-ROK alliance into a “comprehensive strategic alliance” in line with its Global Korea strategy, pushing the alliance to expand its scope from peninsular to regional and global security.²⁹ The 2010 Cheonan sinking and Yeongpyeong-do shelling incidents on the inter-Korean border pulled the alliance's focus back to North Korea instead of the South China Sea and maritime security issues that were emerging at the time. Strategic divergence between the United States and South Korea began to appear as related to China.

Focused mainly on the North Korea missile threat, the first steps toward institutionalization of defense relations emerged. The Lee administration strengthened the US-ROK alliance, but also prioritized improving Japan-ROK relations. Japanese and ROK defense authorities signed a memorandum on Japan-Korea defense exchange for the first time in 2009.³⁰ The memorandum acknowledged the *defense exchanges* expanded to practically all levels in the past decades and left room to explore *defense cooperation* in new areas, which implied agreements such as the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) and the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA).³¹ While ACSA was shelved, Japan and ROK focused on GSOMIA, which was almost signed in 2012 but failed due to South Korean domestic politics. It would later be signed in 2016 during the final year of the Park Geun-hye administration.

On the trilateral front, defense ministerial meetings began in 2009, held annually at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. At the working level, Defense Trilateral Talks (DTT) at the director-general, deputy-vice-minister, and assistant-secretary levels began. Trilateral and multilateral exercises were also increased. With ROK participation from 2009, the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) was added to the menu of multilateral exercises such as the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) and Cobra Gold Exercise. For the first time, Japanese and ROK navy officers alternated in participating as observers in US-ROK exercises (Invincible Spirit) and US-Japan exercises (Keen Sword), which was stipulated in the 2009 memorandum to facilitate the “discussion and participation of observers to exercises.”³²

Bilateral and trilateral Japan-ROK defense ties were at their highest point with progress in joint exercises, mainly among the two navies. Even though the history issue continued, Japan-ROK relations between Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and President Park Geun-hye were positive as defense ties were protected and augmented by trilateral initiatives. Abe and Park were at odds, however, over the so-called “comfort women” issue. President Obama intervened to facilitate summit-level dialogue and held a trilateral summit on the sidelines of the Hague Nuclear Security Summit in 2014. In the meantime, the US-Japan-ROK Trilateral Information Sharing Agreement (TISA) was signed in 2014 to share information through the United States, limited to North Korean missiles. Eventually, Japan and the ROK signed the “comfort women” agreement in 2015 and GSOMIA in 2016. Due to Park’s impeachment in 2017, however, there was not enough time to implement the agreements.

The trilateral experienced a major downturn with the advent of South Korea’s progressive Moon Jae-in administration. The Moon administration acknowledged the importance of US-Japan-ROK trilateral cooperation, limited to North Korea issues, but was wary of proceeding further into what it thought would be a formal military alliance, manifested in its Three No’s policy.³³ Japan-ROK bilateral ties dipped to the bottom in 2018-2019, and damaged not only bilateral but also trilateral defense ties with the United States.³⁴ Defense exercises continued only in multilateral formats. Among them, the Pacific Vanguard, Pacific Dragon, and the Enforcement Coordination Cell were notable examples.³⁵

The third period of revitalization of the US-Japan-ROK trilateral came in the 2020s, symbolized by the Camp David Summit between President Biden, President Yoon, and Prime Minister Kishida. The Biden administration came back with a strong alliance policy and prioritized rebuilding the trilateral relationship. The ROK leadership changed to a conservative administration

under President Yoon Suk-yeol and prioritized re-strengthening the US-ROK alliance, Japan-ROK relations, and US-Japan-ROK trilateral relations. Strategic convergence regarding the Indo-Pacific region among the three countries emerged as the Yoon administration synchronized with the United States and Japan with its Indo-Pacific Strategy in December 2022. In Japan-ROK relations, the diplomatic conflict over the Korean wartime laborers issue during the Japanese colonial era was settled by President Yoon's bold decision to provide third-party compensation, avoiding a legal clash with Japan. Bilateral ties were restored at the summit between Kishida and Yoon in March 2023 in Tokyo, the first stand-alone bilateral summit in twelve years. This paved the way for the historic Camp David Summit in August 2023.

The Camp David Summit: Incorporating the “Northeast Asia Anchor” into the Indo-Pacific

The Camp David Summit was historically significant in many ways. First of all, it was the first time that the US-Japan-ROK trilateral relationship was given this much political attention at the top level as the first stand-alone summit in its history. Second, the agreements were very comprehensive and rather impressive, drawing upon past agreements, adding new dimensions, and setting a new and higher standard for the partnership. There are three documents: the “Camp David Principles,” a joint vision statement confirming shared values and norms, mutual respect, and commitment to peace and stability as Indo-Pacific nations; the “Spirit of Camp David,” an agenda of actions and initiatives to promote institutionalization; and the “Commitment to Consult,” a short two-paragraph document that serves as a pledge to consult in response to regional challenges not limited to the North Korea issue.³⁶

In sum, Camp David was a summit-level boost to *redefine* and *reconsolidate* the trilateral relationship as an Indo-Pacific partnership and to embed the “Northeast Anchor” in the Indo-Pacific security network. *Redefinition* aims to enhance shared values and strategic alignment, expanding and adapting the trilateral agenda to the Indo-Pacific region. *Reconsolidation* focuses on institutionalization to build a more stable and resilient institutional foundation for consultations and cooperation, to better withstand political backwinds such as leadership and policy changes, and to facilitate greater coordination.

Redefinition through shared values and strategic alignment

The Camp David Principles confirmed shared values and goals: “As Indo-Pacific nations, Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK), and the United States will continue to advance a free and open Indo-Pacific based on respect for

international law, shared norms, and common values. We strongly oppose any unilateral attempts to change the status quo.” Based on these shared goals and values, and based on the three countries’ respective Indo-Pacific strategies, the United States, Japan, and South Korea came into strategic alignment on issues in the Indo-Pacific region.³⁷ The Spirit of Camp David broadened the trilateral agenda from North Korea to the Indo-Pacific region and beyond, including Ukraine and economic security, as an “Indo-Pacific Partnership.” US-Japan-ROK cooperation had already been redefined as an Indo-Pacific partnership during the trilateral leaders’ meeting on the sidelines of the East Asia Summit in November 2022.³⁸ This expansion was known mainly among regional experts, but the stand-alone summit at Camp David had impressed upon the media and the public that this is the new normal.

A notable point in the joint statement was that the principles of upholding the rule-based international order and maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region were addressed before the North Korea and Korean Peninsula issues. Commitments to the Taiwan Strait and voicing concern about Chinese and Russian behavior were stepped up. China was specifically named in a trilateral document for the first time: “Recalling the publicly announced position of each of our countries regarding the dangerous and aggressive behavior supporting unlawful maritime claims that we have witnessed by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in the South China Sea, we strongly oppose any unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the waters of the Indo-Pacific.” South Korea has carefully stepped up its commitment to maritime security in the Indo-Pacific, which includes the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.³⁹ Regarding North Korea and the Korean Peninsula, the statement reaffirmed the three countries’ commitment to the denuclearization of North Korea, support for a free and unified Korean Peninsula, which marked the first time that Japan committed to this principle in an official document, and the US extended deterrence commitment to Japan and the ROK.⁴⁰

Reconsolidation through institutionalization

The Spirit of Camp David set an ambitious agenda of consultative and cooperative mechanisms. The Camp David agreements not only redefine trilateralism but reconsolidate the relationship through a comprehensive menu for institutionalization. Its aim is to get out of the vicious cycle of on-and-off, ad-hoc engagements of the past. The joint statement spelled out the spirit of cooperation: “This is a moment that requires unity and coordinated action from our true partners, and it is a moment we intend to meet, together.” The trilateral relationship needed to be “locked in,” as a senior US official described, to make it a more reliable, resilient, and working framework.⁴¹

Firstly, to institutionalize the relationship, high-level annual consultations ranging from leader-level summits to ministerial-level and national security advisor-level meetings were agreed upon. This would pave the way for future two-plus-two ministerial meetings, which have never been held in the trilateral US-Japan-ROK or the bilateral Japan-ROK contexts. An assistant secretary-level Indo-Pacific dialogue was also agreed upon to coordinate Indo-Pacific strategies with an emphasis on Southeast Asia, ASEAN, and Pacific Island countries – two key areas for development cooperation.⁴²

Secondly, in defense and security, a consensus was reached on regularizing and expanding the scope of trilateral exercises within a “multi-year” timeframe, as compared to the ad-hoc, one-off plans in the past. The envisioned “annual, named, multi-domain” exercises would include cyber and space; operationalizing information- and data-sharing to exchange real-time missile warning data to improve ballistic missile defense; establishing a cyberspace working group on DPRK activities; establishing a maritime security cooperation framework, including capacity building assistance in Southeast Asia and Pacific island countries; coordinating on countering disinformation; and enhancing information sharing and coordination in general, including disruptive technology protection.⁴³

Thirdly, economic and technology cooperation would be discussed in the Trilateral Economic Security Dialogue, augmented with initiatives such as a pilot supply chain early warning system, national laboratories partnerships, cooperation on protective networks against disruptive technologies and technology standards, and women’s economic empowerment.⁴⁴ Cooperation with the European Union and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) is another feature. Fourthly, US-Japan, US-ROK, and Japan-ROK bilateral initiatives in development finance, maritime security, and humanitarian response would be coupled with trilateral mechanisms. Lastly, coordination on global issues such as climate change and health, as well as promoting people-to-people exchange and human resource development initiatives, were agreed upon.⁴⁵

Lastly, the Commitment to Consult aims to further consolidate consultations and coordination to a broad set of regional challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. Coordination mechanisms such as TCOG existed before, but they were specifically limited to North Korean policies. This time, the leaders and governments committed 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,” and “share information, align our messaging and coordinate response actions.”⁴⁶ Regional challenges could include not only North Korea but also the Taiwan

Strait and maritime and economic challenges such as economic coercion. However, it was also made clear that this document was a political commitment, not a legal treaty-like commitment akin to a formal military alliance. The document added that the commitment to consult “does not supersede or otherwise infringe on the commitments arising from” the US-Japan and US-ROK alliance treaties. Nevertheless, as US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said, the commitment to consult would be a “very significant step” because it meant that “the three countries recognize their common interests in having a coherent and coordinated response to any contingencies,” another step forward to consolidate trilateral cooperation.⁴⁷

The Tasks Ahead for the “Northeast Asia Anchor” in the Indo-Pacific: Policy Recommendations

What are the tasks ahead? The Camp David agreements cover a wide range of areas. New and innovative cooperation is being explored and institutionalized in economic security, technology, and development cooperation. Defense cooperation should also be updated and consolidated through various measures, old and new. Building on the Camp David agreements, how should trilateral defense cooperation be strengthened? What can and should be done or explored to consolidate the Northeast Anchor in the Indo-Pacific?

As a Japanese security expert emphasized, not only the “deep-rooted political frictions” but also the “failure to conceptualize a strategic and operational framework for cooperation” has led Tokyo and Seoul to “underappreciating and undervaluing the benefits of partnership,” and prevented the two countries from “grasping the real challenges in systemizing cooperation.”⁴⁸ The Camp David agreements now serve as the long-awaited, foundational document for strategic and operational cooperation for the trilateral and bilateral relationship. But more must be done to articulate and operationalize the newly formed Indo-Pacific partnership, particularly in the defense area.

The tasks are twofold. First is the scope of strategic cooperation. Strategically, as the “Northeast Asia Anchor,” the US-Japan-ROK trilateral relationship will prioritize North Korea and the Korean Peninsula but, at the same time, needs to focus on the connections between the Korean and Taiwan contingencies – the Northeast Asia “nexus” in the Indo-Pacific. The Northeast Asia nexus can be strengthened through cooperating on broader regional maritime security, covering the area from the Pacific Islands, the Taiwan Strait, the East China Sea, the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, to the eastern coast of Africa, including Djibouti.

The second is institutionalization. This is about how to enable smooth and consistent defense cooperation through security and defense agreements and the regularization of joint activities. The Camp David Summit placed an emphasis on multi-year, multi-domain joint exercise plans. Further institutionalization would help to facilitate joint activities agreed to. Institutionalization can be explored through bilateral (US-Japan, US-ROK, Japan-ROK), trilateral (US-Japan-ROK), quadrilateral (with Australia and AUKUS), or other plurilateral and multilateral frameworks (UNC, NATO-AP4).⁴⁹ Despite Japan-ROK rapprochement, bilateral defense cooperation remains a politically sensitive issue. If the Japan-ROK channel is difficult, pursuing initiatives through trilateral or other plurilateral and multilateral venues would be more politically feasible.

Considering the above, policy recommendations in four areas are elaborated below.

Step up strategic and defense dialogues and announce a joint statement on defense cooperation

Policy documents and guidelines are a compass to guide the leaders, policymakers, and bureaucrats. The Camp David agreements serve as a platform document on which the US-Japan and US-ROK alliances and Japan-ROK relations can expand. On the trilateral front, the agreements agreed upon trilateral summits and ministerial meetings, including defense, “at least annually.” Already, US-Japan-ROK defense ministerial meetings were held in November and December of last year to operationalize real-time radar data sharing and planning for the multi-year, multi-domain trilateral exercises. If the next trilateral summit is held in July on the occasion of the NATO summit in Washington, DC, defense cooperation can be a focus of the agenda.⁵⁰ Trilateral defense ministerial meetings should follow up to prepare a joint statement akin to the US-Japan-Australia trilateral defense statement, specifying measures to further enhance “trilateral activities and exercises,” “expanded cooperation,” and “inclusive partnerships.”⁵¹

For the trilateral relationship to evolve, Japan-ROK defense ties need to be put on a more stable footing. Some experts advocate a Japan-ROK “joint security declaration” modeled after the Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation of 2007.⁵² That would be ideal, but considering the political sensitivities regarding Japan-ROK defense cooperation in both countries, a second option would be to embed defense cooperation in a comprehensive document, as was done in the Japan-ROK Joint Declaration of 1998. Next year, 2025, is the 60th anniversary of the normalization of Japan-ROK diplomatic

relations, so the two governments should be working to put together a “new era” joint declaration to update the bilateral relationship for the Indo-Pacific era.⁵³ Defense cooperation should be updated, reflecting the Camp David summit. Defense ministers or authorities should update the 2009 Memorandum of Intent on Defense *Exchanges* to a Memorandum on Defense *Cooperation*, or a joint statement like those with Australia, United Kingdom, and India, that go beyond “exchanges” to “cooperation” to reflect the realities of today.⁵⁴

Japan-ROK bilateral defense ties are still on cautious grounds due to the 2018 radar lock-on incident between the two navies, which soured the close defense relationship developed since the 1990s. Japan and ROK defense ministers met in June 2023 and concurred on promoting Japan-ROK and US-Japan-ROK cooperation in FOIP, committing to “communicate more closely” and “accelerating consultations on *issues* (italics added) between Japan-ROK defense authorities including measures to prevent recurrence.”⁵⁵ “*Issues*” imply the 2018 naval incident. A public acknowledgment by the two defense ministers regarding an agreement on preventive measures would smooth the way for bilateral cooperation.

Continue to make progress on joint exercises to deepen the Northeast Asia nexus and promote Indo-Pacific maritime cooperation

Regularizing and expanding the scope of trilateral exercises is one of the concrete agreements from the Camp David Summit. Trilateral joint exercises have expanded from naval⁵⁶ to aerial exercises.⁵⁷ The three countries participate in many other multi-domain, multilateral exercises, such as the Pacific Dragon (air and missile defense) that include Australia and Canada, the Pacific Vanguard (maritime operations) with Australia, Sea Dragon (anti-submarine warfare) with Canada and India, the Kamandang (US-Philippines marine/ground component exercises),⁵⁸ and cyber security exercises such as the NATO Cyber Coalition held in Estonia.⁵⁹ Furthermore, contingency planning for Northeast Asian contingencies could be explored trilaterally or multilaterally.⁶⁰ Multilateral operational headquarters such as the ECC (Enforcement Coordination Cell) would be another framework to build on, to support UN sanctions on North Korea and maritime surveillance activities.

As a result, trilateral exercises have slowly expanded their scope, responding to North Korean missile threats but also overlapping with other scenarios involving China and Russia. Former Rear Admiral of Japan’s Maritime Self-Defense Forces (MSDF) Yasuhiro Kawakami observed that “some exercises in Japan, such as US-Japan air and missile defense exercises, Japan-U.S.-South Korea trilateral ballistic missile data sharing exercises, and flight training over

Japanese waters, have increased dramatically since fiscal 2022. These exercises serve not only to establish a presence and deterrence against missile launches by North Korea but also contribute to deterring *major powers* (italics added) from any actual or attempted unilateral changes to the status quo.”⁶¹ The Northeast Asian nexus of cooperation to enhance response capabilities to North Korea, China, and Russia is deepening.

Furthermore, to promote maritime cooperation in the broader Indo-Pacific region, the three countries should utilize other multilateral Indo-Pacific exercises and engagements, such as those with Australia, Canada, Southeast Asian countries, and Pacific Island countries, more systematically. Japan’s MSDF has renamed its deployments to the region as Indo-Pacific Deployments since 2019.⁶² It could be another platform for cooperation with the ROK and other navies from the East and South China Seas to the Aden Gulf. The United States, Japan, and the ROK should coordinate maritime capacity-building assistance to Southeast Asia and Pacific Island countries and utilize the Indo-Pacific maritime domain awareness initiative.

Institutionalize beyond GSOMIA, Utilize the UNC-UNC Rear

To facilitate joint exercises and operational cooperation, GSOMIAs, information sharing agreements (ISA), ACSAs, Reciprocal Access Agreements (RAA), and SOFAs are necessary and have become the standard for Indo-Pacific security cooperation between both treaty and non-treaty allies. Japan’s 2022 National Security Strategy noted that, “Japan will promote enhanced engagement with like-minded countries and others in the Indo-Pacific region through bilateral and multilateral dialogues, bilateral training and exercises, conclusions of information protection agreements, Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA), Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), joint development of defense equipment, transfer of defense equipment and technology, capacity building support, strategic communication, and Flexible Deterrent Options (FDO).”⁶³ The Japanese Ministry of Defense recognizes that defense agreements aim to institutionalize cooperation so that defense cooperation and exchanges can be promoted “more smoothly and consistently.”⁶⁴

Within Japanese security policies, the Japan-Australia relationship is the model case for “quasi-alliance” institutionalization, which includes an ISA, ACSA, and RAA.⁶⁵ These legal agreements have facilitated an increase in joint training between the two countries. In the case of Japan-ROK relations, GSOMIA was signed between Japan and the ROK in 2016, but information sharing needs improvement. Unlike the US-Japan-ROK TISA, the bilateral GSOMIA is not limited to North

Korean missile information but is underused. ACSA was shelved in 2012, but such an agreement is now the standard for facilitating logistics cooperation for both UN peacekeeping missions and joint exercises. RAA would be a bigger hurdle for Japan and the ROK because “reciprocal” access would mean allowing the Japanese SDF to visit or transit through the ROK, which could generate negative domestic political reactions. The fact that the ROK is not inclined to sign RAAs in general, even with its UNC ally Australia, constitutes another hurdle.⁶⁶

If an RAA is not politically feasible, utilizing alternative frameworks such as the “revitalized” UNC/UNC-Rear, which was discussed in section II, would be more relevant. Japan and the ROK are host nations, but they have acted as guests or outsiders. Japan’s MOFA has basically handled the legal paperwork to facilitate personnel and assets to UNC bases in Japan. UNC-related ROK military personnel visit UNC bases in Japan through the UNC-Rear bases visiting programs hosted by the UNC/USFK. Increasingly, UNC sending states observe and participate in joint exercises. Exchanges and engagements with host nation-states (Japan and the ROK) might be more regularized and officialized in the UNC framework.

Explore defense equipment and technology cooperation through the US defense supply chain

Defense technology and equipment cooperation is another standard in Indo-Pacific security cooperation. But this is also a politically sensitive area for Japan and the ROK, as they see each other as competitors. Japan is currently overhauling its laws and industries to rebuild its defense industry base and exports, while the ROK defense industry has rapidly risen as a global defense exporter and an indispensable partner for NATO in the Ukraine War.⁶⁷

Japan and the ROK, however, will be situated as indirect partners in the Indo-Pacific network, namely the US defense supply chain, from ammunition and missiles to high-tech systems. The Biden administration published its National Defense Industry Strategy in January 2024 and aims to construct a defense production network and defense supply chain in the Indo-Pacific and globally.⁶⁸ Japan and South Korea signed the Security of Supply Arrangement (SOSA) with the United States in January and November 2023, respectively.⁶⁹ AUKUS Pillar II may be another platform for defense technology cooperation to “develop and field joint advanced military capabilities to promote security and stability in the Indo-Pacific,” within which “interoperability with allies and partners” will be pursued.⁷⁰ At the recent US-Japan summit, Japan was named the first candidate to partner with AUKUS Pillar II.⁷¹ The ROK, with its world-class defense industry capabilities, is likely to be another candidate.

Conclusion

The US-Japan-ROK trilateral relationship is at a historical juncture. The Camp David Summit has successfully incorporated the traditional “Northeast Asia Anchor” (or “Northeast Asia Hub”) into the Indo-Pacific architecture and redefined the trilateral arrangement as an Indo-Pacific partnership. While cooperation in economic and technological security is breaking new ground, defense cooperation also needs to make progress on what has been agreed upon at Camp David and beyond. While maintaining its uniqueness as the “Northeast Asia Anchor” (or “Hub”) the US-Japan-ROK partnership needs to evolve strategically and institutionally. A more comprehensive approach to defense cooperation should be taken in connection with other allies and partners in the evolving “lattice-work” of Indo-Pacific security cooperation.

In the meantime, domestic politics is kicking back in. Elections would inevitably affect the course of the trilateral relationship. The results of the ROK National Assembly elections in April were a blow to President Yoon and the ruling People Power Party in domestic affairs, but in foreign policy, the Yoon administration is likely to continue to consolidate its achievements. At the same time, the rise of progressives may, again, politicize the Japan issue and the trilateral relationship. Who wins in the US presidential elections in November will also strongly influence the direction of the trilateral.

In Japan, the Kishida administration and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) carry their own political troubles, with LDP elections scheduled for September. While dealing with domestic political issues, Japan must remain the steady anchor in foreign policy to protect and consolidate the achievements made in the Indo-Pacific region, including the US-Japan-ROK trilateral partnership. The recent US-Japan summit was a success with many deliverables. Prime Minister Kishida made a phone call to President Yoon to brief him on the summit and emphasized the importance of the trilateral.⁷² For Japan-ROK relations, next year’s 60th anniversary of diplomatic normalization should be seized upon as the moment to consolidate relations as much as possible but with caution before ROK presidential election politics resume.

Time is ticking. The three countries should make the most of the remaining time to consolidate the gains made at the Camp David Summit, laying the foundations for a more stable and resilient relationship.

Endnotes

- ¹ The author would like to thank the conveners and panelists of the Korea Economic Institute seminar on “From Security Threats to Emerging Tech: U.S.-Japan-South Korean Trilateral Relations,” hosted by the Center for Korean Studies, University of Washington in March 2024. The author appreciates the comments provided by Clint Work, Gilbert Rozman, and Jeffrey Hornung on the draft paper.
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- ³ Thomas Wilkins, “A Hub-and-Spokes ‘Plus’ Model of Us Alliances in the Indo-Pacific: Towards a New ‘Networked’ Design,” *Asian Affairs* 53, no. 3 (2022): 457-480; Jake Sullivan, “2021 Lowy Lecture,” Lowy Institute, September 11, 2021, <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/publications/2021-lowy-lecture-jake-sullivan>; Rahm Emanuel, “A New Era of U.S.-Japan Relations,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 3, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-new-era-of-u-s-japan-relations-defense-asia-ebd4813a>.
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- ⁵ Kei Hakata, “Japan and the Indo-Pacific; The formation of a geostrategy” in *Indo-Pacific Strategies: Navigating Geopolitics at the Dawn of a New Age*, ed. Brandon J. Cannon and Kei Hakata (New York: Routledge, 2022), 81-99; Yuki Tatsumi, “Japan’s Indo-Pacific Strategy,” Korea Economic Institute of America, November 2, 2023, <https://keia.org/publication/japans-indo-pacific-strategy>.
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- ⁹ Satake Tomohiko, “Tracking the Pathway to a ‘Quasi-alliance’: Japan’s Policy toward Australia from 2013 to 2022,” The Asan Forum, March 21, 2022, <https://theasanforum.org/tracking-the-pathway-to-a-quasi-alliance-japans-policy-toward-australia-from-2013-to-2022>; Satake Tomohiko, *Nichigo no anzenhoshou kyouryoku: “kyori no sensei” wo koete [Japan-Australia Security Cooperation: Beyond the “Tyrrany of Distance]* (Tokyo: Keiso Shobo, 2023). Japanese media such as *Nikkei*, *Yomiuri*, and *Asahi* often use the term “準同盟” (jun-doumei or quasi-ally/quasi-alliance) for the Japan-Australia relationship, notably since the revised Japan-Australia Security Declaration was signed in October 2022.

- ¹⁰ The author referred to the trilateral as “the anchor in Northeast Asia security” in “Japan-South Korea Relations and the Biden Factor,” Council on Foreign Relations, December 21, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/japan-south-korea-relations-and-biden-factor>.
- ¹¹ “UNC Fact Sheet,” Yokota Air Base, September 2020, https://www.yokota.af.mil/Portals/44/09_21_UNCFactSheet_v6.pdf.
- ¹² The Japan-UN SOFA treaty signatories are Japan, Australia, Canada, France, Italy, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Africa, Thailand, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States. See “UNC Fact Sheet.”
- ¹³ “UNC FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions),” United Nations Command, <https://www.unc.mil/Resources/FAQs>. Since the establishment of Combined Forces Command (CFC) in 1978 as part of the US-ROK alliance structure, the UNC’s main task is to oversee the Armistice Agreement. The combat operational command functions and UNC operational control of the ROK forces was transferred to the CFC.
- ¹⁴ Kawana Shinji, *Zainichi Beigun Kichi: Beigun to Kokurengun, “Futatsuno Kao” no 80-nenshi [US Bases in Japan: 80 Year History of the Two Faces, US Forces and UN Forces]* (Tokyo: Chuokoronsha, 2024).
- ¹⁵ Kawana Shinji, *Zainichi Beigun Kichi*; Clint Work, “UN Sending States: The Forgotten Parties in the Korean War,” *The Diplomat*, August 7, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/08/un-sending-states-the-forgotten-parties-in-the-korean-war>.
- ¹⁶ Major General Chang Gwang Hyun, former UNC-MAC representative, noted that he deepened understanding of the “strength” and “strategic value” of the UNC and the UNC-Rear through these visits. Chang Gwang-hyun, *United Nations Command Insights* (Seoul: Seonjin, 2022), 120-127. As a recent example of these visits, General Kang Shin-chul, US-ROK CFC deputy commander, visited UNC-Rear bases in Japan accompanied by Lieutenant-General Andrew Harrison, deputy commander of the UNC, in November 2023. “CFC deputy commander to visit U.N. Command rear bases in Japan,” *Yonhap News*, November 27, 2023.
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- ²⁰ The Secret Korean Minutes of 1960 is an annex to the US-Japan Security Treaty, which essentially allowed the United States to continue using bases in Japan (UNC bases) without “prior consultation” in the case of a Korean contingency. In 1969, the Japanese government attempted to neutralize the secret minutes with the Korea clause in the 1969 Nixon-Sato Communique, affirming that South Korea’s security was essential for Japanese security. In 2010, the Japanese government under the Democratic Party of Japan commissioned an experts’ review of the secret minutes and concluded that the minutes were “de facto” nullified, though this remains debated. Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada made official remarks in June 2010 that Japan would “appropriately and swiftly” respond with prior consultation in case of a Korean contingency. See Kawana, *Zainichi Beigun Kichi* (2024); Okada Katsuya, *Gaiko wo Hiraku [Opening up Foreign Policy]* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2014), 55-64; Dong-jun Lee, “From the Secret ‘Korean Minute’ to the Open ‘Korea Clause’: The United States and Japan and the Security of the Republic of Korea,” *Asian Perspective* 36, no. 1 (2012): 123-145; Michishita Narushige and Azuma Kiyohiko, “Chousen Hantou Yuji to Nihon no Taiou [Korean Contingency and Japan’s Response],” in *Chousen Hantou to Higashi Ajia [The Korean Peninsula and East Asia]*, ed. Kimiya Tadashi (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2015), 191.
- ²¹ In January 2018, Canada hosted a Foreign Ministers’ Meeting on Security and Stability on the Korean Peninsula, inviting 20 nations, among which 16 were UNC member states, and Japan. See Michael Bosack, “Relevance Despite Obscurity: Japan and the United Nations Command,” *Tokyo Review*, February 1, 2018, <https://tokyoreview.net/2018/02/relevance-despite-obscurity-japan-un-command>.
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- ²³ The United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, Japan, France, and Germany are members of the coalition. Artem Sherbinin, “Enforcing Sanctions on North Korea is an Opportunity for Cooperation at Sea,” *War on the Rocks*, March 16, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/03/enforcing-sanctions-on-north-korea-presents-an-opportunity-for-cooperation-at-sea/>; “U.S. 7th Fleet Enforcement Coordination Cell Visits Partner Nations, FS Tonnerre,” US Indo-Pacific Command, June 21, 2021, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2664969/us-7th-fleet-enforcement-coordination-cell-visits-partner-nations-fs-tonnerre>. According to the UNC, 1156 personnel, 19 aircraft, and 6 ships from Australia, Canada, France, New Zealand, Thailand, and the UK visited UNC-Rear bases in Japan in 2022. See Ito Kotaro, “Aratana takami e hikiagerareta Nichi-bei-kan Anpo Kyoroku to Kokurengun Shireibu wo meguru ugoki [US-ROK-Japan Security Cooperation to a New Level and developments surrounding the UNC],” Canon Institute for Global Studies, December 1, 2023, https://cigs.canon/article/20231201_7793.html.
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- ²⁵ Former defense officials say that the MOD and SDF have not been directly involved with UNC-Rear but should be more conscious of developing military-to-military relations. See Hikaru Tomizawa, “Nikkan kankei to Kokurengun Chii kyotei -Chosen hantou niokeru kokurengun (takokusekigun) no sonzai igi to wagakuni no taiou [Japan-ROK Relations and UN SOFA Agreement: UN Forces (multinational forces) on the Korean Peninsula, its value and our

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²⁶ Regarding the “virtual alliance” or “quasi-alliance” concept in the context of US-Japan-ROK relations, see Ralph Cossa, *US-Korea-Japan Relations: Building Toward a “Virtual Alliance”* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 1999); Victor D. Cha, *Alignment Despite Antagonism: The U.S.-Korea-Japan Security Triangle* (Stanford University Press, 1999); Akutsu Hiroyasu, “Nichigo, nichiin, nikkan, gokan anzen hoshou kyoryoku no rironteki gan-i : jundomei renkei no bei habu ando supoku domei shisutemu iji koka ni kansuru ichi kosatsu [Theoretical implications of Japan-Australia / Japan-India / Japan-ROK / Australia-ROK security cooperation: An initial analysis of quasi-alliance cooperation in the US Hub-And-Spoke alliance system in the Asia-pacific],” *Hogaku Kenkyu* 83, no. 3 (Tokyo: Keio University) (March 2010): 423-454; Brad Glosserman and Scott A. Snyder, *The Japan-South Korea Identity Clash: East Asian Security and the United States* (Columbia University Press, 2015); Yasuyo Sakata, “ROK-Japan Defense and Security Cooperation in the US-ROK-Japan ‘Virtual Alliance’: Evolution and Prospects,” *New Asia* 24, no. 3 (Seoul: New Asia Research Institute, Autumn 2017): 118-155.

²⁷ Track-two initiatives supported official-level defense cooperation, such as the Japan-ROK Shuttle between 1997 and 1999 under ROK’s New Asia Research Institute and Japan’s Okazaki Institute. See *Korea-Japan Security Relations: Prescriptive Studies*, ed. Rhee Sang-woo and Kim Taehyo (Seoul: Oruem Publishing House, 2000). The initiative is mentioned in Sakata, “ROK-Japan Defense and Security Cooperation,” 125-131. See also Togashi Ayumi, *Nikkan Anzenhoshoukyouryoku no Kensho [Examining Japan-ROK Security Cooperation]* (Tokyo: Aki Shobo, 2017).

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³⁰ The Memorandum of Intent for Defense Exchange between the Japan Ministry of Defense and ROK Ministry of National Defense was signed on April 23, 2009. See “Defense of Japan 2009,” Ministry of Defense, http://www.clearing.mod.go.jp/hakusho_data/2009/2009/html/13322100.html.

³¹ Sakata, “ROK-Japan Defense and Security Cooperation,” 135-143.

³² Sakata, “ROK-Japan Defense and Security Cooperation,” 143.

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- ³⁴ The Abe-Moon period were the most contentious years in the history of the Japan-ROK relations since normalization. The spat over history issues soured defense and economic ties. The 2015 comfort women agreement was essentially neutralized by the Moon government, the Korean wartime laborers issue re-emerged with the 2018 ROK Supreme Court ruling. The radar lock-on incident between the two navies and the Japan SDF military flag issue, both in 2018, damaged the Japan-ROK navy ties. The Abe administration, frustrated with the Moon government, abruptly imposed export control measures on South Korea, and the Moon government rashly responded by almost nullifying GSOMIA in 2019. The Trump administration intervened at the last minute and stopped the trilateral defense relationship from unraveling, but the damage was done.
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US-Japan-ROK Trilateral Cooperation in International Development: Global Trends, National Variations, Opportunities and Challenges

By Jessica C. Liao

Introduction

August 18, 2023, marked a historic moment for the relationship between the United States, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (ROK). The leaders of the three countries met at Camp David and vowed to work toward a new era of trilateral partnership and a common vision for the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. “Ours is a partnership built not just for our people but for the entire Indo-Pacific.” Together, US President Joe Biden, Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio, and ROK President Yoon Suk-yeol pledged to cooperate on a multitude of policy issues. Furthermore, a “G7-style” meeting was convened between leaders, cabinet-level principals, and senior staff to institutionalize working-level cooperation in the coming years.

While not the first endeavor to forge trilateral cooperation, the Camp David Summit was extraordinary for the scope of issues that the three leaders vowed to work together on. Crucially, development policy and development finance emerged as a focal point of trilateral cooperation. Development cooperation between the world’s largest economies – if realized – has profound impact on the Indo-Pacific region and great implications for forging the trilateral partnership. With this goal in mind, this article raises three questions: What does the Camp David Summit pledge to achieve in development cooperation? How and to what extent can the United States, Japan, and the ROK actualize their pledge? What are the opportunities and challenges facing this cooperation? The goal of this article is to answer these questions by assessing the three countries’ development policies and institutions on the one hand and the Indo-Pacific region’s development needs on the other.

I make three arguments. First, the Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a shared focus of the United States, Japan, and the ROK’s development policies, driven by their converging geostrategic interests. In fact, such convergence has taken

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place for some time, as the three countries have created sprawling types of development programs across the region over the past decade or more. The Camp David Summit signifies the trilateral partners' shared endeavor to take an institutional and systemic approach to align and coordinate their existing programs to achieve common objectives. Second, trilateral development cooperation at the macro-policy level faces challenges from not only the Indo-Pacific region's massive infrastructure demands but also at the micro-policy level, as variations among development policy modalities and practices and the involved business interests could obstruct trilateral cooperation. Therefore, it is easier for the three partners to begin cooperation in smaller official development assistance (ODA) projects rather than large, complex, and capital-intensive infrastructure development. Third, understanding such variations is crucial for the United States, Japan, and the ROK to set realistic goals and priorities for cooperation, which does not always require doing things together trilaterally. The three countries should enhance coordination to achieve complementarities and utilize their respective development specializations and resources to scale up impact and support the Indo-Pacific's developmental needs.

This article is comprised of four parts. The first part is a policy background, discussing historical trends in development policy and financing, as well as national variations in such policy practices. It provides context relevant to assessing foreign aid and development finance cooperation between the United States, Japan, and the ROK. The second part overviews what the three countries have accomplished or committed to accomplishing in promoting development cooperation at Camp David and the following events. The third part examines these recent movements along with the record of the three countries' development policies in the Indo-Pacific. It analyzes the challenges and opportunities for trilateral development cooperation. Although the three countries' domestic politics is not the center of the analysis in this article, the final part discusses the implications of this analysis in the context of their current and upcoming political events.

Policy Background

From Aid to Development Beyond Aid: Pressing Need of Development Finance

A rapid shift in the development paradigm took place at the turn of the 21st century. The persistence of global poverty and continuing income gaps between developed and developing countries imposed unprecedented pressures to reform the status quo regarding foreign aid ideologies and practices.¹ Against this backdrop arose the grand project of the United Nation Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the consensus on a new strategy

for aid effectiveness. However, the risk of failure to fulfill MDGs was vast, given leading donors' rising fiscal constraints and diminishing foreign aid contributions throughout this period.

As such, the notion of “development beyond aid” began gaining currency among donors.² At the 2002 International Conference on Financing for Development, aid donors reached the Monterrey Consensus and endorsed “the value of exploring innovative sources of finance” to meet development needs. The trend of “financializing” development continued into the 2010s, as the world struggled to recover from the largest financial crisis since the Great Depression, and the threat of undoing the MDG achievements loomed large. Despite such challenges, in 2016, leading donors concluded another grandiose project – the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), vowing to end global poverty as well as build a world of equity, inclusivity, and sustainability. The financial scale envisioned by the SDGs was unprecedented and far bigger than the MDGs, with an estimated \$3.9 trillion required annually to fulfill the SDGs.³

Under the auspices of the 2023 Agenda for SDGs, development finance has become the new lexicon among donors, calling to mobilize diverse and broad-based financing sources for sustainable development from the public and private sectors. Alongside this change came the mainstreaming of blended finance and public-private partnerships.⁴ Blended finance is “an approach that can be used to enable the private sector to invest where it would not otherwise be possible.”⁵ To do so, support grew among donors to expand not only ODA but also other official flows (OOFs), including concessional and non-concessional loans and official export credits and insurances, to supposedly better leverage private capitals.

Also indicative of this paradigm shift is that development finance institutions (DFIs) facilitating the functions of OOFs have arisen as key players to support the delivery of SDG projects.⁶ For example, the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the private sector lending arm of the World Bank, began to play a more prominent role by integrating public and private clients in their work. The Asian Development Bank, among other multilateral development banks, has also made market development and assistance to public-private partnerships (PPP) a top priority in their operations. According to the World Bank, the value of PPP project commitments in low- and middle-income countries has grown rapidly in the past decade and reached \$91.7 billion in 2022.⁷

Nonetheless, many obstacles remain, considering the immense capital gap

facing the developing world. In Asia, an estimated \$1.7 trillion is needed annually by 2030 to support the region's sustainable development, and an even higher estimate – \$2.9 trillion – is needed should the region achieve the carbon neutrality pledges made in the Paris Climate Summit.⁸ Moreover, the concentration of PPPs in upper-middle income rather than lowest-income countries leads to criticism of DFIs' inefficacy in poverty reduction and closing the income gap between countries. Even in middle-income countries, financial risk and viability continue to dampen the prospect of using DFIs to leverage private capital toward SDG projects. It is also worth mentioning that developed countries themselves have a mixed record with PPPs, which is by no means the cure-all for development and can only succeed with careful design and sound regulation, something particularly lacking in developing countries.⁹

National Variation of Development Finance

In addition to multilateral development banks, bilateral DFIs – ranging from national development banks and export credit agencies to trade and investment insurance firms – are rapidly expanding assets and portfolios in developing countries. However, while playing increasingly central roles in international development, the rise of DFIs also raises new questions – and challenges – for policymakers and researchers alike to contemplate their utility in advancing the 2030 SDG Agenda.

For one thing, protocols between creditors and donors on how their DFIs operate are largely absent. It is important to note that the new trend of development finance is partly the result of an increasingly diverse and fragmented donor landscape, with the rise of bilateral DFIs from emerging donors and creditors in developing countries such as China.¹⁰ Thus far, these emerging creditors have not abided by the OECD principles and practices in their DFIs' operations regarding ODAs or OOFs.¹¹ Influenced by their experience of the South-South Cooperation, they may prioritize their commercial or political objectives rather than aid effectiveness and the SDGs. Their idiosyncratic practices have imposed pressure on traditional creditors and donors' approach to development finance.

Granted, the OECD does not necessarily harmonize the practices and operations of its members' bilateral DFIs toward the SDGs as these institutions are mandated mainly to support national governments' respective policy priorities. Hosting various gentlemen's agreements among its members, the OECD is more effective on issues regarding ODA than OOFs. Additionally, the Association of European Development Finance Institutions (EDFI) – comprising

15 European states and connected to the United States but not Japan and the ROK – is another multilateral entity that sets the SDG-anchored protocols for national development banks. Nevertheless, neither of them has legally binding powers on their members' practices in development finance.

Differences in terms of policy norms and priorities, as well as market interests, lead to variations in development finance practices even within traditional donors. Japan is a case in point. Ingrained in its state-led development model, Japan rose as the world's largest donor in the 1980s while being criticized for practicing “mercantilist aid” by delivering economic infrastructure backed by concessional loans to promote Japanese business interests.¹² External pressures – especially from Washington – coupled with its economic recession throughout the 1990s and 2000s eventually made Japan scale back such practices to align itself with other OECD members.¹³

Yet, partly in response to the competitive pressure from emerging creditors, infrastructure has regained importance in Japan's ODA policy, demonstrated by the 2008 restructuring that again made business promotion an explicit goal of the “economic cooperation” program of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). Crucially, the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) has since become vital in promoting both developing countries' economic growth and Japan's business interests.¹⁴

Formerly a major recipient of Japanese ODA and later becoming an OECD member in 2010, the ROK's ODA policy has been under the influence of both Japan and other OECD states.¹⁵ Exemplified by the Busan Partnership for Effective Development in 2011, the ROK aspires to fashion its own ODA policy as part of its pursuit of “middle power” status. While the ROK's ODA has a significant portion of grants and humanitarian programs, the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) has a significant portfolio in economic infrastructure oriented by Korean business interests. Moreover, like JBIC, the Export and Import Bank of Korea (KEXIM) serves the dual function of development and commercial promotion. Following the development finance trend, both JBIC and KEXIM have become some of the largest bilateral DFIs in utilizing OOFs to promote PPPs.

In contrast, politics surrounding reforming the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) marks an uneasy view of the notion of state-led financing in the United States.¹⁶ Even though the “strategic need” to compete with China for global influence eventually helped bring about the creation of the International Development Finance Corporation (DFC), disagreements

between lawmakers and the executive branch continue brewing regarding many aspects of DFC's operations, such as equality scores and the definition of bankability.¹⁷ These dynamics show a set of norms and institutions distinct from those embodied by JBIC and KEXIM.

Clearly, the United States, Japan, and the ROK have adopted their development policies in response to developing countries' pressing infrastructure needs, as well as intensifying competition among emerging creditors. Yet, as the following section will show, national variations among their responsive policies may constitute barriers – and opportunities – for the trilateral cooperation.

Promoting a Trilateral Approach to Development at Camp David

The Camp David Summit emphasized the three countries' shared approach toward development policy and development finance. Demonstrated by the three summit documents – the Statement of Principles, Joint Statement, and Commitment to Consult – the United States, Japan, and the ROK laid out policy agendas and action plans in development cooperation, as summarized below.¹⁸

Aligning development policy with grand strategy

While affirming their support for the SDGs through trilateral development cooperation, the three countries aim to calibrate their respective development policies along shared strategic interests. Undergirded by their respective Indo-Pacific strategies, the region – especially the Mekong region and Pacific Islands – becomes the focal point of trilateral development cooperation.

To realize their vision of a peaceful, prosperous, and resilient Indo-Pacific, the three leaders put forth an ambitious agenda, covering issues from agriculture, healthcare, and gender equality to climate, water, and energy, as well as digital connectivity, quality infrastructure, and transparent and fair development finance. Notably, this agenda is guided by not only the three countries' strategic frameworks but also their continued stress on the 2030 SDG Agenda.

Enhancing external outreach coordination

The three partners also aim to enhance trilateral external outreach to other developing and development partners. To do so, they proclaim support for three US-led development initiatives: the Partners in the Blue Pacific, the Friends of the Mekong, and the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII). Still, they highlight the importance of using the existing

regional architecture, such as the Association of Southeast Asia Forum (ASEAN) and Pacific Islands Forum, to fulfill the promised “locally led development.”

Enhancing institutional coordination

To implement the above agenda, the summit also outlined the objective of enhancing institutional coordination between relevant government agencies of the three countries. The first line of coordination is centered on aid agencies. Following the summit, a senior-level trilateral dialogue on developing humanitarian responses was held in October 2023 to hash out cooperation priorities.¹⁹ Senior officials of USAID, JICA, and KOICA reaffirmed their joint support for the development of the Indo-Pacific region through streamlining coordination on humanitarian assistance, disaster risk reduction, and other social program deliveries. They also stressed their commitment to building reliable economic infrastructure with transparent and accountable investments.

The second line of coordination is centered with DFI agencies. One of the summit outputs is a memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed by DFC, JBIC, and KEXIM to strengthen cooperation in mobilizing financing for quality infrastructure. On March 6, 2024, the three agencies held a high-level trilateral meeting in Tokyo, stating that they have held a series of working-level meetings to discuss collaborations on energy transition and creating more resilient global supply chains and private capital mobilization.²⁰

Assessing Trilateral Development Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: Opportunities and Challenges

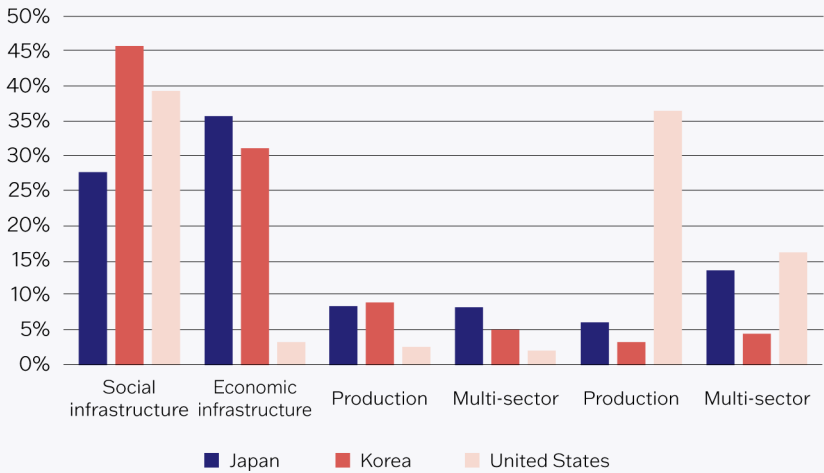
How and to what extent can the United States, Japan, and the ROK achieve their cooperation commitments? The Camp David Summit signifies trilateral efforts to align their development policies with the three countries' Indo-Pacific strategic documents. In fact, the convergence of the macro-level policy has been in process over the past decade, shown by the United States' Rebalance to Asia Strategy under the Obama administration, Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Partnership (FOIP) under the Abe administration, and the ROK's New Southern Policy (NSP) under the Moon administration. Importantly, these strategic frameworks have led the three countries to contribute to a sprawling number of development initiatives and programs in the Indo-Pacific. In 2021, 60.3 percent (\$10.7 billion) of Japan's bilateral ODA and 44.7 percent (\$1.1 billion) of South Korea's bilateral ODA went to Asia (excluding the Middle East). Further,

the ROK confirmed a 30 percent year-to-year increase of its 2024 ODA budget to \$5.3 billion, with the Indo-Pacific remaining the primary target. Despite its longstanding focus on Africa (36.5 percent) compared to Asia (11.1 percent), the US bilateral ODA – as the world’s largest donor – carries significant weight on the Indo-Pacific’s development.²¹ For instance, mandatory funding of \$4 billion in the 2024 USAID budget is dedicated to “support strategic, high-quality ‘hard’ infrastructure investments in the Indo-Pacific” to “strengthen the U.S. role.”²²

However, to assess the prospect of trilateral development cooperation, we should be cognizant that beneath this macro-level policy convergence lies distinct variations of the three countries’ development policy practices and modalities, as illustrated by the sectoral landscape of their bilateral ODA distributions. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, economic infrastructure – particularly the transportation and energy sectors – has accounted for 36 percent and 32 percent, respectively, of the Japanese and South Korean bilateral ODA commitments in 2021. While social infrastructure accounts for more than 45 percent of the ROK’s bilateral ODA commitments, much of the ROK’s programs – like its Japanese equivalents – is delivered as water, irrigation, and sanitation construction. In contrast, social infrastructure and humanitarian assistance account for nearly 80 percent of the US bilateral ODA commitment. Such differences also indicate different ODA modalities of the three countries. While Japan works primarily with recipient countries’ governments and state-owned firms to deliver loan-based ODA programs, the United States delivers mainly grant-based programs to the recipient countries’ non-governmental sectors, while the ROK adopts a hybrid of the two.

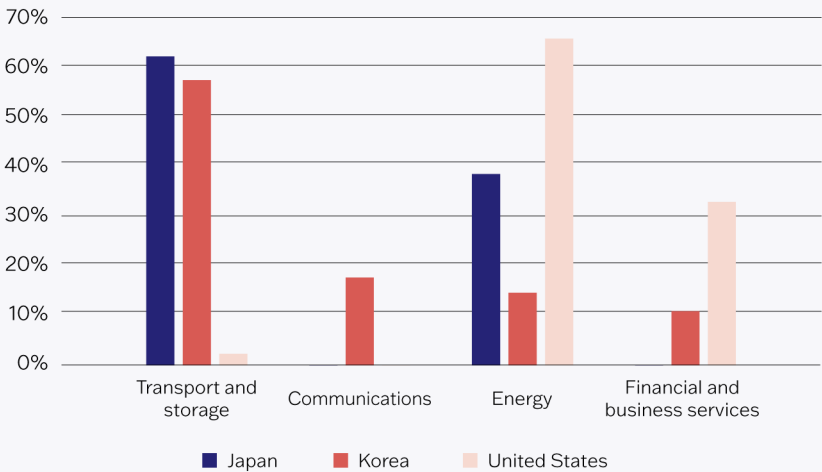
While national variations may present barriers to developing joint ODA programs, room for trilateral cooperation remains ample. In fact, prior to the Camp David Summit, the United States, Japan, and the ROK had already built various bilateral programs or dialogue platforms on overlapping topics, such as climate resilience, renewable energy, digital economy and connectivity, public health, disaster assistance, water governance, gender, education, and entrepreneurship in the Mekong, Pacific Islands, and other regions. In this sense, the current approach toward development cooperation is meant to institutionally and systematically coordinate these programs, pool resources, and mitigate fragmentation and redundancies.

Figure 1. ODA Commitments in 2021



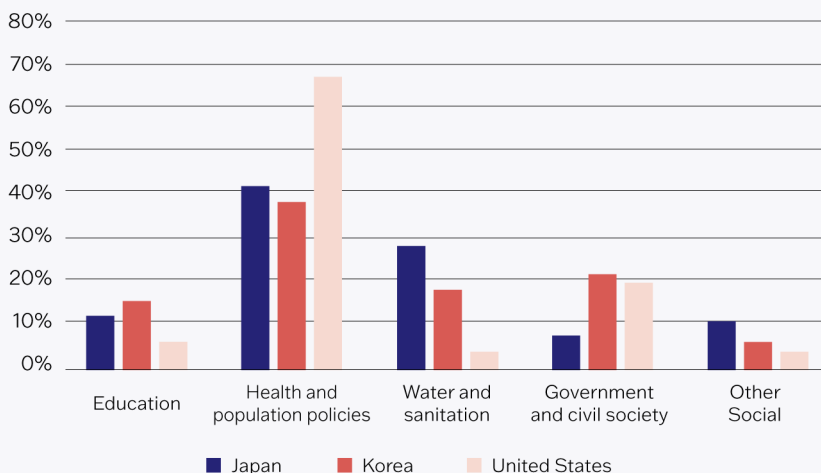
Source: OECD

Figure 2. Economic Infrastructure ODA Commitments, 2021



Source: OECD

Figure 3. Social Infrastructure ODA Commitments, 2021



Source: OECD

The extent of cooperation already made between two of the three countries in the renewable energy sector is a good case in point. Founded in 2019, the Japan-US Mekong Power Partnership (JUMPP) provides bilateral and regional technical assistance to facilitate the region's clean energy deployment, regional power trade, and electrical interconnectivity, and has recently set up a formal technical advisory group. Additionally, the Japan-US Clean Energy Partnership (JUCEP) was built in 2021 based upon the previous Japan-US Strategic Energy Partnership and the US-led initiative, Clean Enhancing Development and Growth through Clean Energy (EDGE) Asia, of which Japan was a key partner.²³ JUCEP is a multi-agency platform to promote renewable energy and decarbonization technologies in the Indo-Pacific. As part of JUCEP, the United States and Japan signed an MoU at the sideline of the 2019 Tokyo International Conference on African Development to extend joint support for sub-Saharan Africa's energy transition. Similarly, KOICA and USAID agreed in 2021 to cooperate on climate change and environmental protection in Vietnam.²⁴ Recently, KOICA also expanded collaboration with USAID and UNDP, among other development agencies, to support Pacific Island nations' access to climate-resilient energy infrastructure.²⁵ These programs could extend into trilateral partnerships to advance the three leaders' pledge of supporting the Indo-Pacific's sustainability and climate resilience.

In fact, as disclosed at the October high-level meeting, the three countries have already formed development cooperation in various areas, such as agriculture, entrepreneurship, healthcare, and gender in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.²⁶ Nevertheless, trilateral cooperation remains in a nascent stage and mainly in the form of technical assistance and capacity-building programs. These programs account for merely a fraction of their ODA operations in the Indo-Pacific. More can and should be done between the three countries to scale up the impact on other domains of development in the region.

The key question is: how can the United States, Japan, and the ROK scale up cooperation and better complement each other with their ODA programs in the Indo-Pacific? Two strategies should be considered. The first strategy is to utilize their sectoral specializations. For example, based on their track record of constructing economic infrastructure, JICA and KOICA could prioritize infrastructure building for the region's connectivity and supply chain, while USAID focuses on social infrastructure, namely, training and capacity building on either project-specific know-how or general knowledge required to operate and maintain such infrastructure. Likewise, JICA and KOICA can use their specialties in building water and wastewater treatment facilities, while USAID, with ample civil society networks, focuses on humanitarian assistance and social infrastructure provision of public health and water security education in the region.

The second strategy is to utilize their country or regional specializations. While Asia has historically been the key region of JICA and KOICA's operations, their programs have overlapped in certain countries in recent years, as shown in Figures 4 and 5. Thus, coordination between the two agencies can better improve the division of labor and efficient resource allocation. On the other hand, with a long and wide presence in the Pacific Islands and East Africa, USAID may supplement JICA and KOICA's programs and play the leading role in coordinating trilateral operations in this region. Furthermore, development partnerships should include other like-minded countries, such as Australia and New Zealand, because both countries are member states of the Pacific Islands Forum and have longstanding development aid projects in the region. These two strategies may also apply to seeking complementarities in development finance cooperation, as the following section will show.

Figure 4. Japan - Top 10 Recipients 2021

(Gross disbursements, million USD, current prices)

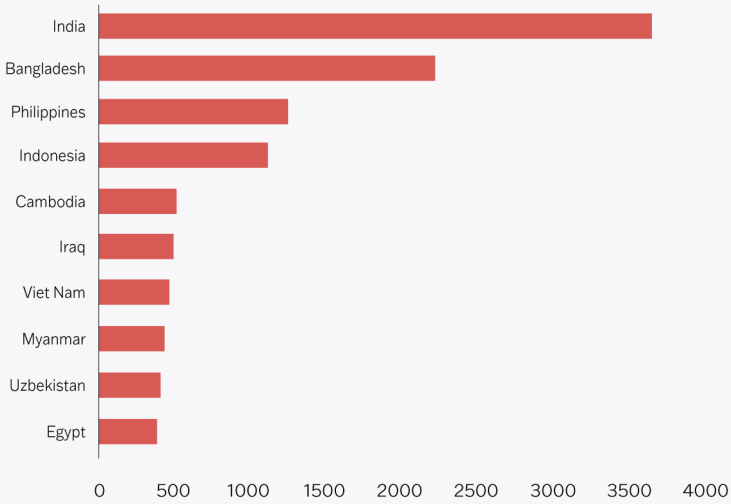
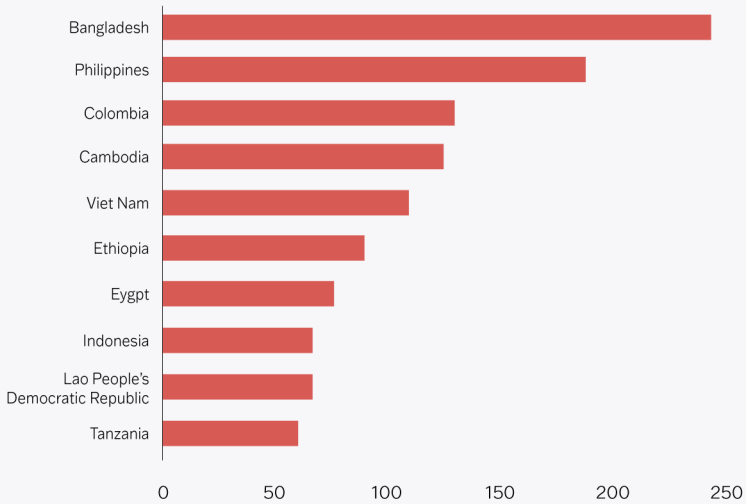


Figure 5. Korea - Top 10 Recipients 2021

(Gross disbursements, million USD, current prices)



To apply these two strategies, the United States, Japan, and the ROK not only have to coordinate policy at the macro level and identify common interests, but they should also incorporate bottom-up input from host countries to actualize “locally led development” stressed during the October senior official meeting. In this vein, the task of policy coordination and finding complementarities needs to extend to the embassy level. In January 2024, the local offices of KOICA and USAID in India signed an MoU for a cooperative partnership in women’s economic empowerment, disaster and climate resilience, and digital literacy, and pledged to expand the partnership into a trilateral one with Japan. Such collaboration is a step in the right direction.

Still, trilateral cooperation in ODA programs might not be sufficient to help countries in the Indo-Pacific achieve the SDGs. Facing the region’s massive infrastructure gap, the three countries will need to expand cooperation to the domain of economic infrastructure, with cooperation in development finance being of vitality to the Camp David agenda.

Trilateral cooperation in development finance

Among the most anticipated items of US-Japan-ROK cooperation is the three countries’ pledge to fulfill the US-led infrastructure initiative, the PGII. Announced at the 2022 G7 Summit, PGII aims to contribute to the SDGs by mobilizing hundreds of billions of dollars in financing toward quality, digital, and climate-resilient infrastructure, food security, and beyond. Following the development financing trend, it is a private sector-focused, government-led initiative to leverage more and bigger PPP projects.

Upon the announcement of the initiative, the United States claimed that \$30 billion has been mobilized toward PGII projects.²⁷ Japan also released a list of flagship projects in five PGII-designated categories. With its attendance at the PGII meeting at the G7 Summit, Seoul expressed high interest from the outset.²⁸ The MoU between DFC, JBIC, and KEXIM at Camp David aims to advance trilateral development financing cooperation at the institutional level.

Indeed, JBIC and KEXIM can play essential roles in implementing the PGII. Following Tokyo’s Quality Infrastructure Partnership and Seoul’s New Southern Policy, the two world’s largest public financiers have rapidly expanded their global footprints, particularly in developing countries. Such expansion is largely due to their shift from a traditional export-credit model to one focused on providing support essential to unlock blended finance, such as insurance and state guarantees. Along with JBIC and KEXIM, the Nippon Export Investment Insurance (NEXI) and the Korea Trade Insurance Corporation (K-SURE) are also actively expanding similar products to support private firms’ overseas investments.

Moreover, the Japan Overseas Infrastructure Investment Corporation for Transport and Urban Development (JOIN) was created to carry out the mandate of PPP promotion. Supported by the Japanese Ministry of Finance, JICA, JBIC, and NEXI, JOIN was established to better utilize a mixture of public funds to reduce private investors' risks. Particularly after Japan's loss to China in the bidding of the Jakarta-Bandung Highspeed Railway in 2015, Tokyo's capital injection and legislative amendments have helped enhance JOIN's functions. It has since invested in dozens of large-scale PPP projects, of which a majority are in the Indo-Pacific states, such as Vietnam, Indonesia, and India.

The ROK is moving in a similar direction. Founded in 2018, the Overseas Infrastructure and Urban Development Corporation (KIND) has provided support for Korean firms' infrastructure and other investments in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. With these new arrangements, Japan's investment support reportedly increased by nearly 90 percent between 2019 and 2020, with a total of approximately \$37 billion in 2020 – more than double the amount provided by all other OECD countries combined! As the second-highest investment support provider, the ROK's investment support in 2020 increased by about 8 percent to \$7.5 billion, the highest amount since 2018.²⁹ Notably, this estimation covers the two countries' investments in both developing and developed countries.

However, the above trends indicate that even though JBIC, KEXIM, and DFC all cater to the financial needs of their firms seeking overseas markets and forming business partners, differences exist in their practices, which are embedded in the above-mentioned national variations. One of the biggest differences is DFC's prohibition against supporting state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in developing countries, which are major recipients of JBIC and KEXIM's infrastructure lending and work frequently with Japanese and business firms. While like JBIC and KEXIM, the promotion of American overseas markets is part of DFC's stated goals, it functions more like a private sector-facing aid agency and has no clear mandate to support PPPs. There are legitimate concerns about supporting SOEs in developing countries, considering their financial and governing records and it remains debatable whether one type of development finance practice is better than the other. Nevertheless, the point stands that co-financing between these agencies is a difficult task.

Still, knowing this difficulty is crucial to setting realistic goals of cooperation between the three agencies, which does not necessarily require co-financing. The latest high-level trilateral meeting is a positive sign, during which JBIC, KEXIM, and DFC aligned their goals in decarbonization, resilient global supply chains, and digital infrastructure and announced their current focus on digital infrastructure sectors with an emphasis on crucial partners, such as India.³⁰

The two strategies discussed earlier may further help advance these common aims. For instance, while information and communication technology (ICT) is the common target, JBIC and KEXIM may support public infrastructure projects, while DFC may support private entrepreneurs in this sector. DFC can tap into JBIC and KEXIM to reduce the high risk that often deters private investors in low-income countries. Likewise, JBIC and KEXIM may collaborate with DFC to attract highly competitive US ICT firms and learn about their corporate governance practices. Furthermore, the three countries may use their respective financial technical aid to improve regulatory governance and foster a PPP-enabling environment in recipient countries. Additionally, JICA and KOICA may provide technical assistance in building capital management and regulatory capacity, leveraging their high-growth “Asian” experience, as USAID can focus on helping them meet international standards for capital markets management.

Sustainable development is another priority for cooperation. From the US Energy Policy Act of 2020 and Clean Energy for America Act of 2021-2022 to Japan’s Green Growth Strategy of 2020 and Korea’s Green New Deal of 2021, climate policies have elevated as national priorities in all three countries. Crucially, these policies pledge to promote carbon neutrality through massive investments at home and abroad. To fulfill these policies, DFC, JBIC, and KEXIM have been actively expanding co-financing partnerships or investing in climate-themed funds with both bilateral and multilateral DFIs over the past few years. This process is incremental yet necessary to compensate for the weak and fragmented coordination between bilateral DFIs. For example, JBIC and IFC recently signed an MoU to strengthen co-financing in the environment and infrastructure sectors.

Such bank-to-bank collaboration should not be limited to bilateral DFIs but expand to include private financiers if the three agencies hope to leverage greater private capital. It is undeniable that private financiers prioritize shareholder interests rather than development promotion. However, they are not only essential because high-impact projects are capital-intensive and require greater resources, but they are also better positioned to ensure the bankability of PPPs due to their insights on market trends and industry connections. In fact, with the trend of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) in the business world, private financiers are increasingly interested in adopting best practices and forming public partnerships to strengthen their reputations. Moreover, cooperating with DFIs also helps share the risks incurred when investing in developing countries. Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corp and MUFG have signed sustainable financing agreements with both JICA and JBIC, and at the Tokyo International Conference on African Development in 2023, the two financial juggernauts, together with other Japanese banks, signed

MoUs with several African countries to support sustainable economic growth. Similarly, DFC and Citi announced co-financing agreements for renewable energy projects in East Africa and East Europe.

To further ensure the delivery of quality infrastructure, the United States and Japan should also bring the ROK into the Blue Dot Network (BDN). Started in 2019 by the OPIC/DFC, JBIC, and Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the BDN is a certification scheme aimed to foster quality infrastructure for sustainable and resilient development. The BDN has built a framework aligned with other global standards, including the G20 Principles for Quality Infrastructure Investment, the UN SDGs, the IFC Performance Standards, the Equator Principles, and OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises and the Recommendation on the Governance of Infrastructure. In April 2023, the United Kingdom joined the BDN Steering Committee, giving additional momentum to this initiative. With its expansive overseas infrastructure portfolios, the ROK's participation can enhance Korean firms' global recognition while boosting the BDN's impact on development financing.

In addition to private banks, the three countries should also bring other private players into the fold because their market interests are critical to realizing the PGII. Industries and trading companies provide important input in guiding co-financing arrangements at the project level. For example, JICA and KEXIM co-funded Kenya's largest geothermal power complex following a business partnership between Hyundai Engineering and Toshiba Equipment.³¹

None of the steps above are easy to implement, and trilateral cooperation in development finance has a long way to go. Cooperation is not a linear path, and certain degrees of learning by doing are inevitable among the agencies and firms involved. However, the United States, Japan, and the ROK should work together step by step to scale up cooperation from bilateral to trilateral and to multilateral, which can only be achieved by making consistent long-term investments in this partnership.

Conclusion

Development cooperation between the United States, Japan, and the ROK is of vital importance to their common vision in the Indo-Pacific region. Cooperation in this area is not only important in keeping the momentum of trilateral cooperation after the Camp David Summit but also in creating “buy-ins” of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), which continues to encounter skepticism from countries in the region.

This article provided an overview of opportunities and challenges for Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo to consider should they wish to produce tangible, actionable, and timely results. Such results are imperative for fostering a supportive environment for trilateral cooperation. Crucially, the three countries should expect that Indo-Pacific states would continue infrastructure development collaboration with other creditors – specifically China, which is the largest economic partner for many states in the region. This is particularly so as Chinese banks and industries, such as those in renewable energy sectors, are among the most active and competitive. Regardless, US-Japan-ROK collaboration is necessary for filling the Indo-Pacific's vast infrastructure gap, especially when disparity and inequality continue to threaten the region's peace and prosperity. Demanding the Indo-Pacific states choose one side or the other as the infrastructure partner is impractical, if not countering, to the goal of gaining support from the region.

While not the focus of the discussion, this article recognizes that the most critical challenge to the realization of trilateral development cooperation remains domestic politics. On the one hand, Japan-ROK cooperation continues to be shadowed by events such as the major reshuffling of the Kishida cabinet over the fund scandal, the Yoon administration's recent electoral defeat, and bilateral disputes over various long-lasting issues. On the other hand, the US presidential election in November 2024 can drastically affect the course of trilateral cooperation as well as US pledges of support for the Indo-Pacific region. Nevertheless, the steady expansion of development finance funds and foreign aid budgets over the past several years in all three countries – including the latest USAID budget approval with bipartisan support – is a positive sign that the three countries recognize the urgency in elevating their leadership on international development.

Considering the uncertainties of current geopolitical and global economic dynamics and Beijing's rise as the Indo-Pacific's largest bilateral lender, Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul must realize the high stakes associated with amplifying their role in the region's development to maintain a free, open, and rules-based order, which they cannot do without consistent efforts in building the trilateral partnership. As Biden, Kishida, and Yoon have taken steps in the right direction, more leaders and politicians in the three countries must exemplify greater political courage to come into line in carrying out the Camp David Spirit.

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Section 2

Triangular Relations in the Indo-Pacific



North Korea, Russia, and China: Past Cooperation & Future Prospects

By Syd Seiler

Introduction

Major geopolitical shifts are rare, difficult to identify, or otherwise misinterpreted as they unfold. Episodic and opportunistic interactions among states may be overinterpreted as being part of a grand strategy, the result of conspiratorial coordination and cooperation and having much greater substance and sustainability than they entail. Shifts based upon personalities and personal relationships between leaders may be ascribed more durability and sustainability than they deserve.

Those cautions aside, there are numerous reasons to be concerned about the recent developments in relations between North Korea, Russia, and China. As the nature of the North Korea-Russia relationship over the past few years moved beyond arms deals to a more dangerous strategic partnership, the evolution of North Korea-Russia cooperation has been the most potentially destabilizing development on the Korean Peninsula in decades. Motivations such as Moscow's need for munitions to sustain its military operations in Ukraine and Pyongyang's need to circumvent sanctions and pressure appear likely to continue over the near term. Beijing's reluctance to apply pressure on Pyongyang for its illicit missile launches, on Russia for its military aggression in Ukraine, and on both North Korea and Russia for their recent cooperation is a reminder that these three countries, their shared values, and their overlapping interests pose risks to regional and international security.

It is thus natural to worry about new developments in North Korea-China-Russia relations as they openly challenge the United States, its allies, and its interests. Yet, it is also important to examine these dynamics within the context of past interactions that served to limit just how effective, sustained, and thus threatening such trilateral ties have been to the geopolitical order in Northeast Asia.

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Toward this end, this article examines North Korea-China-Russia relations within the context of North Korea's geopolitical reality and foreign policy over the past several decades, briefly examining North Korea's relationships with China and the Soviet Union during the Cold War; how North Korea navigated these relations during its post-Cold War nuclear and missile pursuit; recent developments in relations since 2020; and what trilateralism might look like in this newly emerging world order by focusing on the potential risk of increased North Korean aggression resulting from a newfound boldness and brutality encouraged by trilateral alignment.

Cold War Northeast Asia: Challenges For Pyongyang

The experience of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) throughout the Cold War was marked by tumultuous ebbs and flows in its relationships with the People's Republic of China (PRC, or China) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR, or the Soviet Union). Some of the events, upheavals, and changes were unique to that period. Yet, at the same time, principles that applied then continue to apply today, providing insight into possibilities that might mark a New Cold War construct for the Korean Peninsula.

DPRK-USSR: A Strained Patron-Client Relationship

Relations between North Korea, the Soviet Union, and China were far from strong and steady since the beginning of the Cold War. The Soviet hand was dominant in installing Kim Il-sung as North Korea's leader in 1945 and building the government, party, and military structures necessary for the regime to survive.¹ Yet five years later in 1950, it was China that provided the necessary forces to prevent a humiliating defeat for North Korea in the Korean War. Changes in the post-Stalin Soviet Union were perceived by Kim Il-sung as both ideologically and practically threatening to the legitimacy of his regime, which was modeled after the Stalinist Soviet Union. For their part, post-Stalin Soviet leaders felt comfortable distancing themselves from North Korea, seeing little value in the relationship ideologically, economically, and geopolitically.

A mutual defense treaty between the Soviet Union and North Korea was concluded in 1961.² Although somewhat mirroring the 1953 US-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty, the USSR-DPRK treaty was marked by skepticism in Pyongyang about Moscow's willingness to risk nuclear war with Washington to come to its rescue.³ Confrontation with the United States, Europe, and China dominated the Soviet Union's geopolitical priorities. Moscow never provided the type and volume of support to move North Korea from surviving to thriving, while Kim Il-sung carefully avoided North Korea's full integration into the Soviet

Union's economic and trade structure so as to maximize autonomy and avoid developing dependencies on the Soviet Union. North Korea's view toward the Soviet Union further deteriorated as détente between Moscow and Washington advanced, initial market reforms were introduced in the Soviet Union, and eventually, the Soviet Union itself collapsed.

DPRK-PRC: Lips and Teeth?

China, too, never had a sustained motivation nor available resources to become a reliable partner, let alone a major benefactor, of North Korea during the Cold War. Beijing's depiction of the PRC-DPRK relationship as being one of "lips and teeth" was erroneously interpreted by some outsiders as reflecting inherently inseparable closeness and fraternity between two close allies. Instead, "lips and teeth" merely described a geographic reality of a shared border that necessitated China's intervention in the Korean War to maintain a buffer state between China and the US-occupied South Korea.⁴ China was inclined to think about the Korean Peninsula more in geopolitical and security terms, and thus the aid provided by China to help rebuild North Korea in the immediate aftermath of the Korean War was pragmatic and crucial to Chinese interests.⁵ This need to bankroll the North would diminish over time. After the Korean War and the departure of the Chinese People's Volunteer forces from North Korea in 1958, a mutual hands-off and distanced approach served both countries well: Pyongyang could minimize Beijing's leverage or influence over its governance, while Beijing avoided any need to invest significantly in its neighbor as it lacked both the resources and interests to do so. As China began to experience economic growth through reform and opening up, Pyongyang once again found itself at ideological odds with a communist ally, which only worsened as Beijing later expanded its ties with Seoul.

North Korea: Marginalized and Isolated by Design

North Korea was able to pursue a distanced approach toward its two biggest partners and neighbors while maintaining its autonomous isolation due to the low priority Beijing and Moscow placed on their respective relations with Pyongyang. There was no real interaction between the three countries that would meet the definition of "trilateralism," and even the bilateral relations Pyongyang enjoyed with its two neighbors and ideological comradery during the good times were dwarfed in impact by US alliances with the ROK and Japan. It was by choice that Kim Il-sung avoided closer relations with China and the Soviet Union, while the latter two saw no particular value in forcing Kim into a relationship he was otherwise reluctant to pursue.

1988-2019: Pyongyang's Thirty-Year Nuclear-Based Survival Strategy

Although the DPRK leadership had long contemplated the military and geopolitical advantages of possessing nuclear weapons prior to the geopolitical transformation of the Socialist Bloc in the early 1990s, the collapse of the Cold War structure made such weapons critical to the regime's long-term survival.⁶ The challenge would be both technical and diplomatic: securing materials, designing devices, developing delivery vehicles, and ultimately deploying such capabilities would have to be done in a manner that did not generate intolerable levels of diplomatic blowback.

Existential Crisis

By the end of the 1980s, trouble was already emerging for North Korea with drastic changes in China, the weakening and ultimate collapse of the Soviet Union and the Socialist Bloc, and South Korean advances in the political, diplomatic, and economic spheres. North Korea became left behind in the zero-sum competition with South Korea, and even its military advantage over the South was beginning to erode.⁷ These setbacks went beyond symbolic to what could be termed existential. How could North Korea survive in a world where other like-minded states – autocratic socialist regimes, some with whom North Korea had close ties – began to fall one by one? To whom could North Korea turn if its two top benefactors, China and Russia, were now seeing more value in good relations with South Korea? How could Pyongyang contemplate reconciliation and normalization with Seoul and Washington without risking the weakening of its regime and control mechanisms?

Response: Deterrence, Development, Diplomacy

Pyongyang commenced three major lines of effort to ensure regime survival in an increasingly hostile world during the 1990s.

- 1. Hold Seoul hostage.** Well before North Korea had nuclear weapons, it secured the ability to hold large numbers of civilian and military targets at risk through the forward deployment of hundreds of long-range artillery guns capable of striking the greater Seoul metropolitan area. This investment proved wise over time: any consideration of military action by the United States against the North – whether in the pursuit of regime change during a collapse contingency or to roll back its growing nuclear program – was taken off the table given the threat of high civilian casualties in the opening stage of any conceived scenario.

2. Develop, demonstrate, and deploy a viable nuclear capability.

Although some date Kim Il-sung's intent to develop nuclear weapons as far back as the 1950s,⁸ it was in the early 1990s that Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program began to grow in earnest: first with the commencement of plutonium production through reprocessing spent fuel rods from a graphite moderated reactor, and second with the pursuit of a highly enriched uranium path to weapons-usable nuclear material.⁹ The march was slow, methodical, and incremental – reflecting the reality that North Korea did not perceive an urgent and imminent security threat – but strategic in nature, seeking to reestablish dominance on the Korean Peninsula and later declare an ability to subjugate the South.¹⁰

3. Buy time and seek concessions through charm offensives.

From the early 1990s, North Korea began to leverage periods of dialogue and restrained behavior to mitigate pressure, discourage the consideration of military options to end its nuclear program, and seek short-term concessions to monetize, albeit so far to a modest degree, its nuclear status. These periods of charm – particularly high-level inter-Korean talks from 1990 to 1992, the inter-Korean summit in June 2000 and the subsequent visit of Madeleine Albright to Pyongyang in October 2000, the Six-Party Talks period between 2003 and 2008, US-DPRK talks during the Obama administration, and the charm offensive between 2018 and 2019 that included two summits with President Trump – all bought time for the nuclear and missile programs to advance while creating in no sustained progress toward either denuclearization or the improvement of relations with the United States and South Korea.¹¹ The true value of these periods of diplomacy was allowing North Korea to deter and deflect excessive political, economic, and military pressure as its weapons program grew incrementally and steadily.

Nuclearization While Navigating Beijing and Moscow

When it came to relations with Beijing and Moscow between the early 1990s and 2019, this period was not easy for Pyongyang, yet it was one that it successfully navigated by proceeding at a pace sufficiently measured to avoid crossing any red lines for any of the players involved. Certainly, North Korea wished it had more support from China and Russia. North Korea had been one of the first countries to applaud China's first nuclear test.¹² However, China had no congratulatory message for North Korea's first test in October 2006. Meanwhile, Russia has consistently insisted on North Korea's denuclearization.

Although neither China nor Russia were the most committed enforcers of sanctions and pressure on North Korea, they also did not provide North Korea with anything but a bare minimum lifeline.

PRC: Please Remain Calm

China's position during these years of North Korea's nuclear and missile growth was one consistently articulated in its public talking points: stability first, denuclearization second.¹³ Unable to moderate Pyongyang's behavior, Beijing sought to contain and discourage Washington from moving down a more aggressive path or exploiting the North Korean issue to the detriment of China's interests. Beijing's episodic cooperation with Washington in applying pressure on Pyongyang was greatest when it feared more aggressive US action. Such was the case when China shut off oil flow to North Korea in March 2003 following its Taepo Dong-2 rocket launch and subsequently pressured North Korea to come to the Six-Party Talks out of fear military options were being considered during the early years of the Bush administration in 2002 and 2003.¹⁴ In 2017, China's acceptance of higher-impact sanctions on North Korea through United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions was driven by concerns about options Beijing believed were being considered by the Trump administration. Chinese pressure on North Korea was the bare minimum necessary to restrain US actions while simultaneously avoiding, as much as possible, squandering its limited leverage with Pyongyang in a way that might otherwise backfire, raise tensions, and potentially lead to conflict on its doorstep. Short of such concerns, Beijing continues to show a high tolerance for North Korea's missile-related provocations and will likely ultimately accept a seventh nuclear test, if and when it comes.

Russia: Right Beside China

Russia's policy toward North Korea during this period was, generally speaking, to follow China's lead. Russian foreign policy primarily focused on Europe, with the overarching interest in Asia being its relations with China. Thus, the Korean Peninsula was simply not a priority for Russia. Likely, Russia calculated that it had little practical leverage with North Korea, could gain political points by deferring to China's lead, and would be sufficiently able to dodge pressure from the United States to do more. Its participation in the Six-Party Talks sought to project an image of being a major player on the issue, but Russia ultimately and somewhat pragmatically avoided playing a larger role out of the same assessment that it had limited leverage to discourage either Kim Jong-il or Kim Jong-un from going down their desired path.

The DPRK Perspective

Pyongyang's diplomacy with Beijing and Moscow over the course of its thirty-plus year development of a nuclear weapons capability was a mix of managing their demands to come to the negotiating table, mitigating pressure from both powers after high-profile nuclear and missile testing, and pleading the case that US hostile policy justified its nuclear pursuit. Neither Beijing nor Moscow abandoned the goal of denuclearization in their respective public statements or enforcement of sanctions on North Korea. Nor did they give Pyongyang the impression it was succeeding in its broader diplomatic goal of gaining acceptance as a nuclear power. As long as China and Russia were still going through the motions of working within the existing rules-based order, North Korea would be frustrated with its inability to gain acceptance for its nuclear program from either country. However, those days now look to be far behind the current geopolitical context.

2020-Today: Inching Beyond Denuclearization

The period between Pyongyang's short-lived charm offensive in 2018 and 2019 to the present represents a transitional period for North Korea. Pyongyang's goal for decades has been to gradually build tolerance of its nuclear actions and eventually secure acceptance of its nuclear-armed status in the international arena. The question is now whether developments in the North Korea-China-Russia triangle will validate North Korea's long-standing optimism that it can endure isolation and pressure without engaging in denuclearization negotiations.

DPRK's Confident Isolation

North Korea's current hard-line refusal to engage in any type of dialogue that includes the nuclear issue was the "new way" Kim Jong-un warned of first in his New Year's address on January 1, 2019.¹⁵ One year later, Kim declared a "Head-On Breakthrough Offensive" in a report delivered at the Fifth Plenum of the Seventh Party Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea released on January 1, 2020. Kim declared that the country must assume "as a fait accompli" a "protracted period of living under sanctions" and that a combination of austerity and self-reliance would be necessary to overcome the current situation.¹⁶ With isolation, austerity, and self-reliance declared as the path forward for North Korea, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the implementation of such principles.

With Kim having mapped out a way forward that minimized the importance of diplomacy, North Korea could resume ballistic missile launches in 2019 and accelerate them over the next few years with little concern about their implications for diplomacy with either the United States and South Korea, dialogue with whom had been abandoned, or with Russia and China, whom Kim likely assumed would probe for re-engagement once COVID-related restrictions were eased. In the meantime, Chinese and Russian refusal to take action supporting UNSC resolutions in response to North Korean launches from 2019 onward reaffirmed the logic of Kim's path. Although he did not formally secure Beijing and Moscow's blessings for Pyongyang's nuclear-armed state status, Kim had succeeded in advancing toward his goal of international acceptance of North Korea as a sovereign nuclear-armed state that could launch missiles when it wanted, conduct nuclear tests when needed, and still be open to friendly relations with those countries willing to accept this new reality. The one remaining question circa 2020, however, was what type of diplomacy Kim would pursue once COVID-related restrictions were lifted. As such, Kim and his foreign-policy team considered possibilities for diplomacy without the denuclearization issue being anywhere near the table.

Russia's Desperation Meets DPRK Opportunism

It will always remain a legitimate counterfactual question whether Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-un would have found comfort in each other's arms at this point in history if not for Russia's urgent need for munitions on the Ukrainian battlefield. It is unlikely that a shared hatred of the United States and the liberal rules-based order would have resulted in more than rhetorical affirmations of ideological solidarity and support, with Kim and Putin urging the other to fight the good fight. Russia would continue to pay lip service to the need for denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and, consistent with Chinese talking points, point the finger at the United States for the current deadlock in negotiations while knowing it is North Korea who is refusing to return to the negotiating table. Just as Putin would likely not have been inclined to chase after Kim, it is questionable whether Russia would have been Kim's first major diplomatic pursuit following the loosening of COVID-related restrictions. Other than preserving a certain level of decency in the relationship to maintain Russia as a safe haven for North Korea's weapons procurement specialists, money launderers, and illegal workers, there is little Russia could offer to Kim at a cost Moscow would consider and in which he would be interested.¹⁷ The types of Russian assistance now being discussed in terms of military assistance and arms had not previously been on the table.

Yet, here we are with a war underway in Ukraine, a desperate need for munitions by Russia, and a willingness on Kim's part to go public with the relationship even while denying the munitions support.¹⁸ Initially, the clandestine nature of the deal, the denial from both Moscow and Pyongyang, and the limited scale of the support could be dismissed as a combination of one-off desperation and opportunism.¹⁹ The fact that North Korean support now includes short-range ballistic missiles and that Russian offers to North Korea could potentially include materials and technology necessary for both its weapon of mass destruction (WMD) and conventional programs is exponentially more troubling.²⁰ Recent developments in bilateral ties project an appearance of sustainability and, thus, strategic importance going forward.

Russia's Relaxation on Denuclearization

The first significant strategic action was the attendance of Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu at the North Korean military parade held on July 27, 2023, marking the 1953 Armistice Agreement or, as North Korea defines it, "Victory in the Great Fatherland Liberation War."²¹ Although far short of Russian recognition of North Korea as a nuclear power, the fact that Shoigu stood next to Kim Jong-un as North Korea's latest ICBMs passed the stage and that this took place a day after Kim had shown these ICBMs to Shoigu during a visit to an arms exhibition displayed Russia's comfort level in being seen as a close ally of a nuclear North Korea.²²

What Russia Seeks

With Shoigu's visit, both Moscow and Pyongyang appeared willing to move cooperation beyond illicit arms transactions and occasional rhetorical expressions of support. It is possible Putin perceived multiple advantages for putting Russia-North Korea cooperation on the international stage. Putin likely calculated this would goad US officials and be seen as a failure of US efforts to isolate Putin for his transgressions in Ukraine. Public proclamations of assistance to North Korea likely also had Seoul as an intended audience, demonstrating to South Korea that there would be a price to pay for supporting Ukraine.

It seems premature to conclude, however, that Putin's motivation in advancing the relationship with North Korea was to support a more grandiose strategy of establishing an alternative bloc system consisting of like-minded countries eager to develop a viable alternative to the US-led liberal order. Given Russia's traditional view of North Korea, Putin likely sees limited strategic value in Kim Jong-un as a viable partner in advancing Russian interests. It is also unlikely that Putin envisions a longer-term opportunity to expand and integrate North Korea's munitions production capabilities to essentially sub-contract Russia's munition requirements down the road.

What Pyongyang Seeks, For Now

North Korea's motivations have significant, if perhaps only temporary, overlap with those of Russia. Kim needed a diplomatic victory following his dismal engagements in 2018 and 2019. To both internal and external audiences, Kim can message advances in the North Korea-Russia relationship as validating the basic tenets of North Korean diplomacy outlined in the Fifth Party Plenum of the Seventh Party Congress: North Korea will find "breakthroughs" despite sanctions and pressure, relying on its own efforts and in cooperation with other countries who respect North Korea's choices, policies, and sovereignty.²³ The same message is directed toward the United States and South Korea and is succeeding to a limited effect, as calls are being made within the United States to abandon pressure and sanctions within the broader goal of complete and verifiable denuclearization and move toward an engagement policy built upon recognizing North Korea as a nuclear power.²⁴ Such signs likely encourage Kim to believe this approach will work over the longer term. The fact that some have gone so far as to blame the Yoon and Biden administrations for policy negligence that pushed Kim into Putin's arms likely also encourages Kim.²⁵

China's Current Inward Focus

China has been nervously quiet about recent developments in the North Korea-Russia relationship. This may speak to unspoken but real Chinese concerns over the potentially destabilizing elements of enhanced North Korea-Russia strategic cooperation. It may be that China finds itself back-footed, having expected to have been the first country with whom Kim sought to engage as pandemic restrictions were lifted. There have been a number of lower-level exchanges with China, but Kim's focus has so far been on Russia, and this alone is likely generating curiosity, angst, and even jealousy in China about the true nature of North Korea-Russia cooperation and potential security implications for Northeast Asia.²⁶

Three Futures: Responsibly Restrained, Reencouraged Rogue, Ready for Revisionism

The above review of North Korea's interactions with China and Russia reveals very little in terms of past deliberate and designed trilateralism. Shared or overlapping interests have been limited so far. The whole of any potential trilateral configuration is likely seen by all three parties as less than the sum of its parts – the parts being existing bilateral relationships. In regards to China, North Korea, and Russia, we have three authoritarian systems with personalistic tendencies that are protective of their sovereignty and autonomy and

comfortable working in traditional bilateral structures. Skepticism, therefore, over enduring trilateralism among the three is warranted; negligence of the threat of collaboration and cooperation among these three rogue actors, however, must be avoided.

So What Should We Be Most Worried About?

The most immediately discernible impact of Moscow's warming to Pyongyang is the weakening of targeted sanctions to slow the growth of Pyongyang's WMD program and bring Kim back to the negotiating table. Russia is throwing a lifeline to North Korea that will enable it to more confidently endure sanctions and pressure. This was, to be fair, a trend already underway as hundreds of North Korea missile launches since 2019 have gone unpunished in the UNSC due to Chinese and Russian opposition.²⁷

The more urgent question is how evolving relations between Pyongyang, Beijing, and Moscow might harm the current balance of power on the Korean Peninsula, threatening the tenuous but enduring peace that the peninsula has enjoyed for the past seventy years. For instance, what are the implications of Russia's technical and material assistance to North Korea's conventional and WMD capabilities? Would such trends encourage Kim Jong-un to believe that the use of force might otherwise be justified in this New Cold War structure?

Scenarios for North Korean Use of Force

A useful framework for examining how deteriorating trends in the behavior and rhetoric of China, North Korea, and Russia might lead to a crisis on the Korean Peninsula can be found in a recent National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) by the Office of Director of National Intelligence that projected various scenarios for North Korea's possible use of its growing nuclear arsenal.²⁸ The estimate, in which key judgments were declassified in June 2023, posited three potential scenarios for how Pyongyang could perceive the value and purpose of a growing nuclear arsenal through 2030: a solely defensive purpose, a coercive purpose to intimidate and blackmail while not challenging the status quo on the peninsula, and a revisionist purpose designed to use force on a larger scale to fundamentally change the status quo on the peninsula to Pyongyang's advantage.²⁹

North Korea's relationships with both China and Russia were important drivers in all three scenarios. Analysts within the US Intelligence Community (IC) assessed Kim would be more aggressive and adventurist if he felt he had the backing or tolerance of Beijing and Moscow. Pyongyang would continue or

expand its coercive use of military force, backed by nuclear weapons, if he felt diplomatic blowback was manageable and that China and Russia would continue to provide “lifelines” to ensure North Korea’s survival.³⁰

Despite the overlap that these three scenarios have, the framework provides a useful tool to assess future threats posed by a steadily growing North Korean nuclear program. Are we likely to see a benign and responsible nuclear North Korea that would only use nuclear weapons in self-defense? Will we have a coercive nuclear North Korea that will pose the same deterrent challenge it has for the past seven decades, relying on one-off provocations of limited objectives and generally de-escalatable? Or are we dealing with a nuclear North Korea that is going to seek a return on investment by using its nuclear weapons to pursue a broader change in the geopolitical balance of power on the Korean Peninsula through the use of force, including the possible use of nuclear weapons? This framework may also provide a useful tool to prognosticate future possibilities for trilateralism in the coming years.³¹

Scenario One: China and Russia Responsibly Restraining North Korea

The best-case scenario is that trilateralism evolves in a manner in which both Beijing and Moscow see value in using the trilateral construct to develop and use leverage to restrain Pyongyang and discourage dangerous and destabilizing behaviors. This assumes that Beijing and Moscow value stability and predictability in Northeast Asia more than they prioritize using issues related to the Korean Peninsula to distract, aggravate, and even weaken the United States in the region and globally. For its part, Pyongyang would need to demonstrate a willingness to exercise restraint for the common good, with confidence that such good behavior would yield tangible benefits. This would require a shift away from Pyongyang’s preferred approach of unilateralism, which utilizes coercion and intimidation as tools to compel Seoul to the table from a position of strength.³²

It is difficult to imagine such a scenario for several reasons. First and foremost is the value Pyongyang places on autonomy, sovereignty, and self-reliance. North Korea inherently distrusts the outside world, builds a domestic and external policy framework inoculating its system from outside pressure, and is most comfortable when its diplomatic interactions with the outside world minimize any leverage that could be used by a counterpart to shape or restrain North Korea. Kim will seek to keep as many options open as possible, finding that sustained normalized behavior takes North Korea off everyone’s radar.³³

Scenario Two: Beijing and Moscow Encouraged Pyongyang's Coercion

A second outcome, which was termed “coercive” by the NIE, was deemed by IC analysts as the “most likely” scenario, one in which nuclear weapons are used as a backstop for coercive behavior (including kinetic/lethal provocations) that have been a tool of North Korea’s diplomacy over the decades.³⁴ In such a case, China and Russia in a trilateral construct might:

- 1. model and justify** aggressive force that North Korea may emulate;
- 2. assist and strengthen** North Korea’s WMD or conventional forces;
- 3. direct or embolden** military action by North Korea.

North Korea-Russia cooperation, marked by defiance, aggressiveness, and the legitimization of the use of force to achieve strategic goals, could lead to a North Korea that is much stronger and more emboldened to misbehave. Such behavior would be underscored by North Korean confidence in both the success of its coercive actions and the support from Moscow (and even Beijing) to mitigate blowback. Kim Jong-un may perceive US concerns about nuclear escalation as being sufficient to move the United States to deter or discourage ROK responses to increasingly provocative DPRK actions.³⁵

Russia and an Already Underway Dangerous Disruption of the Peninsula:

These and similar concerns have driven worries about the nature of North Korea-Russia cooperation over the past year. US National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby noted on January 4, 2024, “In return for its support, we assess that Pyongyang is seeking military assistance from Russia, including fighter aircraft, surface-to-air missiles, armored vehicles, ballistic missile production equipment or materials, and other advanced technologies.”³⁶ The concern is two-fold: Russia is providing critical missile and nuclear technologies to help North Korea advance its WMD program, and Russia’s transferring of technologies and materials could advance the reliability and lethality of key North Korean conventional systems. Most viable coercive options consist of actions in the conventional or gray zone (i.e., cyber) backstopped by nuclear threats: the likelihood of such coercive action increases as Kim’s confidence in each category of his military capabilities grows.

China’s Concern About Its Backyard

How China responds to this is an interesting yet unanswered question; in some ways, it may be the test of trilateral cooperation. For Putin, there is little risk in

meeting with Kim Jong-un, making ideological proclamations about fraternal commitments to the anti-US and anti-imperialist struggle, allowing shipments of new technologies and capabilities to North Korea, and even offering broad if somewhat vague encouragement that Russia would have North Korea's back should troubles escalate with the United States. The same, of course, is not true for Xi Jinping. Russia has a much lower price to pay than China in the event of a sudden and uncontrollable escalation of tensions on the Korean Peninsula. Putin could even reap the benefits of conflict on the peninsula and the resulting drain of US and South Korean resources without a serious risk of instability or harm to Russia's core national interests. Again, that is not the case with China, which suggests that differing views on North Korea could serve as an irritant in the PRC-Russia relationship.

Scenario Three: Sum of All Fears...Revisionism?

The most dangerous outcome of North Korea-China-Russia trilateralism would be one in which North Korea perceives the overall international environment as conducive to using its acquired capabilities and at high diplomatic and economic costs to achieve long-standing strategic objectives on the Korean Peninsula. Kim may feel he can take military action to subjugate South Korea, as he recently threatened, believing the United States may be less than willing to risk wider war with either or both China and Russia to defend its South Korean ally.³⁷ The various permutations of such actions are too numerous to explore, but it is useful to posit some high-impact Taiwan-related scenarios.³⁸

1. China commences an invasion of Taiwan and directs North Korea to take actions against South Korea that would tie down US forces, prevent the United States from using its bases and forces in South Korea, and possibly cause Japan to limit its cooperation with the United States. Both Beijing and Moscow support Pyongyang rhetorically and materially. North Korea grabs some South Korean territory, seeking to compel capitulation by Seoul with the threat of nuclear use.
2. China commences an invasion of Taiwan and directs North Korea to refrain from action to ensure Beijing can control escalation. Pyongyang determines, following the conclusion of the Taiwan conflict, that the United States is weakened and will be unable or unwilling to robustly support South Korea if certain redlines (i.e., nuclear use, large-scale casualties, etc.) are not crossed. Pyongyang compels Seoul to negotiate for peace, while Beijing urges Washington to bring Seoul to the table to accept the new facts on the ground and acknowledge Pyongyang's new position of strength.

3. China's actions toward Taiwan are limited in scope but advance its goal of strengthening China's position, particularly in Asia. Both Beijing and Moscow are reluctant to support specific revisionist actions warned by Pyongyang in its rhetoric to "subjugate" Seoul, but they are far more committed to active military cooperation, joint training and exercises, trilateral shows of force, and even cooperation in the nuclear and missile domains. An arms race ensues in Northeast Asia, and talks in South Korea and Japan to secure their own nuclear deterrent advance.

These are just a handful of potential scenarios resulting from troubling trilateralism between China, North Korea, and Russia. Pyongyang would find itself in a club of nation-states rejecting the legitimacy of the so-called Western liberal international order while justifying the use of force toward revisionist ends to correct perceived historical injustices. That said, we have not heard proclamations from Beijing or Moscow urging all aggrieved victims of the unjust US-led imperialist world order arise, go forth, and resolve your grievances. For now, Beijing and Moscow may feel justified in challenging the existing global order for their own specific national interests, but they fall short of demonstrating a desire for a complete challenge to the existing order that would result in global chaos. The key for the United States will be to encourage such a posture without rewarding or incentivizing bad behavior in a way that guarantees a return to concession-earning coercion.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

There are ample reasons to conclude that the more troubling aspects of trilateralism among North Korea, China, and Russia will be mitigated by diverse interests, mutual distrust, and concerns that any one partner's actions could lead to unwanted entanglement.³⁹ This has not motivated Beijing to influence Moscow's actions in Ukraine, and it is very unlikely Xi Jinping's Taiwan calculus factors into what Vladimir Putin thinks. It is possible that the same drivers that limited deeper cooperation between North Korea and its two neighbors during and after the Cold War – Pyongyang's protection of its autonomy and Beijing and Moscow's low priority on relations with Pyongyang – will mitigate the risks posed by cooperation among these three actors.

That said, recent geopolitical developments, particularly the growing strategic relationship between Pyongyang and Moscow, cannot but cause concern about the trajectory of the North Korean nuclear threat and the possibility of conflict on the Korean Peninsula in this dangerously transforming geopolitical environment. The growth of North Korea's nuclear and missile arsenals makes

such a threat more credible; the strengthening of its conventional force enables and emboldens Pyongyang even further. Russian aid to North Korea is a top priority of concern for policymakers and defense planners in Washington, Seoul, and elsewhere.

Deterrence of this threat requires multiple reinforcing efforts. Extended and conventional deterrence remains crucial, as has been the case over the past seventy years of armistice. Multilateral diplomacy and security cooperation among both like-minded and non-like-minded states reinforce the US and ROK deterrent capabilities. Relentless approaches to China and Russia – regardless of their receptivity – must emphasize that constraining, not enabling and emboldening, North Korea is in their best interests, not just ours. Beijing and Moscow may be inclined to ignore such concerns, accuse us of exaggerating the threat, and hope for the best. The job of the United States, South Korea, Japan, and like-minded states is to convince and remind Beijing and Moscow that they will be unable to avoid incurring high costs for North Korea's coercive and revisionist behavior. Such an approach may be the best, if not the only way, to shape troublesome trilateralism in Northeast Asia going forward.

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The Asian Triad at a Crossroads: Challenges and Prospects for South Korea-Japan-China Trilateral Cooperation

By Seong-Hyon Lee

Introduction

The trilateral relationship between South Korea, Japan, and China has reached a critical juncture, with historical grievances, territorial disputes, and the US-China strategic rivalry shaping their interactions. The fabric of bilateral relations, foundational to the trilateral partnership, is fraying. South Korea-China relations have deteriorated to their lowest point since the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1992, especially in the aftermath of the THAAD dispute in 2017, and have yet to find the momentum to recover.¹ Japan-China relations have also plummeted following the arrest of a Japanese business executive in China on espionage charges and Japan's labeling of China as "the greatest strategic challenge."²

Conversely, ties between South Korea and Japan are experiencing a resurgence under South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol.³ The dynamics among these nations resemble a seesaw; as South Korea and Japan's ties with China worsen, their relationships with the United States strengthen. The United States, as a key ally of both South Korea and Japan and a strategic competitor to China, plays a critical role in shaping this relationship.⁴ The official website of South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs expresses a commitment to "harmoniously develop" both South Korea-US-Japan and South Korea-Japan-China trilateral cooperation.⁵ However, achieving this goal is more complex than it might initially appear.

Historical Context

The establishment of diplomatic relations among the three East Asian countries – starting with South Korea and Japan in 1965, Japan and China in 1972, and South Korea and China in 1992 – marked significant milestones. Despite historical grievances, economic reforms in China and the end of the Cold War spurred regional economic growth and increased diplomatic exchanges. The first trilateral summit between South Korea, Japan, and China began with a breakfast meeting between South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, Japanese Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo, and Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji

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during the ASEAN+3 summit held in Manila in 1999. This eventually led to the inception of annual summit meetings starting in 2008 and the establishment of the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) in 2011, aimed at promoting “peace, prosperity, and cultural exchange.”⁶

Cooperation among the three nations has progressed intermittently over the past 16 years. While the leaders’ summit was planned to be held annually, it has, in practice, been held irregularly, often disrupted by territorial disputes and historical issues.⁷ For instance, the Sino-Japanese dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in 2012 led to a three-year hiatus in summit meetings.⁸ At that time, the Japanese government announced its nationalization of the islands, stating that the move was to prevent Tokyo’s then hawkish Governor Ishihara Shintaro from purchasing the islands, which could have escalated tensions with China.⁹ However, China suspected a “conspiracy” between Ishihara and the Japanese government. The incident followed a 2010 collision between a Chinese fishing boat and a Japanese official vessel, seen by Japan as a sign of China’s growing aggression and by China as Japan’s hardening policy.¹⁰ The territorial dispute occurred amid increased maritime activities by the Chinese Coast Guard and frequent incursions near the islands, highlighting the ongoing conflict between the two nations in the East China Sea.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 significantly disrupted trilateral engagements. Additionally, tensions arising from the deployment of the US THAAD missile system in South Korea, coupled with strengthened cooperation between the United States, South Korea, and Japan, have made China less enthusiastic about resuming full-scale meetings.¹¹ Furthermore, the Ukraine War has significantly influenced the consolidation of alliance structures in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly among the United States, South Korea, and Japan.¹² Considering all these factors, China increasingly perceives the trilateral relationship, which includes two of the US allies in Asia, as another Washington-led mechanism in the region to isolate Beijing.¹³

By 2023, the geopolitical context had evolved, with the Joe Biden administration emphasizing the expansion of US-South Korea-Japan collaboration as a pivotal aspect of its Indo-Pacific Strategy. Highlighted by the Camp David Summit in August 2023, this move faced criticism from China, which perceived it as an attempt by the United States to use its allies to “incite bloc confrontation in Asia” to contain China’s regional influence.¹⁴ Despite these geopolitical tensions, efforts to stabilize US-China relations with a face-to-face meeting between Presidents Biden and Xi Jinping for the first time in a year on the sidelines of the APEC Summit in November 2023 have provided Seoul, Tokyo, and Beijing with a window to rejuvenate trilateral ties.¹⁵

This article, written from a South Korean perspective, explores the challenges and diminishing opportunities for trilateral South Korea-Japan-China cooperation within the broader context of the US-China rivalry. It aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on why these nations struggle to cooperate more closely despite perceived economic benefits, setting the stage for further discussion on this complex issue. For the remainder of the article, I examine lingering animosities among the three countries by illustrating specific incidents, followed by an analysis of the deep economic interdependence that brought South Korea, Japan, and China together in the past but has now become a liability amid diverging strategic priorities in the broader US-China rivalry. Then, this article shows that the vision for regional cooperation and unity between the three Asian states is not a recent development by illustrating prominent figures from history who strived for such a vision, albeit with different contexts and diverging goals. It then moves on to dig deeper into why there are greater challenges and diminishing opportunities ahead despite these underlying currents of efforts for trilateral cooperation. Finally, it concludes with some thoughts on the future prospects of the trilateral relationship, which will ultimately depend on the strategic choices made by the political leaders of Seoul, Tokyo, and Beijing.

Lingering Animosities

The complex historical legacies and territorial disputes among South Korea, Japan, and China continue to influence regional dynamics in East Asia. For instance, in April 2024, the South Korean Foreign Ministry summoned the Japanese Ambassador, Aiboshi Koichi, in response to Japan's approval of a new middle school textbook that downplayed Japan's historical atrocities on the Korean Peninsula. The South Korean government criticized this approval, stating that it "runs counter to the trend of improving bilateral relations between South Korea and Japan" and urging Japan to "squarely face history and take a more responsible attitude in educating the young generation."¹⁶

That same month, the Chinese and Japanese coast guards confronted each other in the East China Sea near the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. This confrontation occurred when a group of Japanese lawmakers, led by former Defense Minister Inada Tomomi, visited the area.¹⁷ Inada's group spent three hours near the islands, using drones to observe the area, while the Japanese coast guard vessel attempted to fend off the Chinese coast guard. This was the first inspection trip to the area by members of Japan's parliament since 2013.

Adding to regional strains, both South Korea and China criticized Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio's offering at the Yasukuni Shrine, a site that both

countries view as a symbol of Japan's wartime militarism due to its honoring of "Class A" war criminals from WWII.¹⁸ In a reciprocal critique, Prime Minister Kishida labeled China "the greatest strategic challenge."¹⁹

Such exchanges reflect the ongoing adversarial political environment in which East Asians, including this author, are raised. The animosity, which is deeply embedded in historical memory and easily provoked in present reality when triggered, illustrates how difficult it is for the three nations to form any kind of common trilateral unity. The Asia bureau chief of *The Economist* once recounted his visit to the TCS office in Seoul and stated that the sight of the three countries' flags hanging side by side somehow looked "unnatural."²⁰

This environment also often sees two of the nations aligning against the third. For example, during his 2014 visit to South Korea, President Xi highlighted past Japanese aggressions to evoke a sense of unity against Japan. He remarked, "In the first half of the last century, Japanese militarism launched a barbaric war of aggression against China and Korea, annexing the Korean Peninsula and occupying half of China, causing immense suffering and devastation to the people and lands of both nations."²¹ He added that the people of the two nations were "interdependent in life and death, and gave their utmost support... during the fiery years of the war against Japan." In contrast, Japanese diplomats and journalists have suggested to the South Korean side that Japan and South Korea, who share democratic values and market economy systems, should unite against China's influence. For instance, Hatoyama Yukio, former prime minister of Japan and currently serving as chairman of the East Asian Community Institute, is well known for advocating for the realization of an "East Asian community" among the three Asian nations. In doing so, he suggested that Japan and South Korea should become "the central axis" of the mechanism.²²

Economic Interdependence and Geopolitical Realities

Amid the US-China rivalry, the geopolitical landscape in East Asia is becoming increasingly complex. China's assertive foreign policies are prompting the United States to strengthen ties with South Korea and Japan to counterbalance China's influence. However, each country's threat perception toward China is influenced by its own historical, economic, and strategic contexts.

China seeks to assert its regional leadership and counter US influence by fostering cooperation with South Korea and Japan. This approach aims not only to create a conducive regional environment for China's rise but also to mitigate the formation of a united front against it. Economically, South Korea and Japan are vital trading partners, and their collaboration helps manage

potential conflicts and maintain regional stability. Despite occasional tensions from disputes in the East and South China Seas, China continues to engage in high-level dialogues and has recently emphasized the importance of economic cooperation among Asian nations. This shift comes as the United States has been urging its allies to reduce supply chain dependencies on China for sensitive technological components. Facing economic challenges and concerns over social stability and regime legitimacy, Beijing appears more eager than it was a year ago to enhance relations with economically significant countries, including its two neighbors.²³

In Japan, tensions between the United States and China have underscored the significance of its alliance with the United States as a counterbalance against China. Despite this, Japan maintains a dual strategy of “engagement” and “vigilance” toward China, emphasizing economic cooperation alongside military caution.²⁴ To this aim, Japan has reinstated the phrase “mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests” for the first time in five years in its “Diplomatic Bluebook for 2024” issued by Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, marking a cautious but hopeful approach for positive economic engagements with China despite underlying tensions.²⁵

Japan’s motivation for enhancing cooperation with China and South Korea stems from several factors. Economically, China is Japan’s largest trading partner, and South Korea is Japan’s third-largest trading partner.²⁶ Strengthening economic ties with these nations is crucial for Japan’s continued growth and prosperity. In particular, China comprises 19.4 percent of Japan’s total exports and 21 percent of its total imports, accounting for 20.3 percent of Japan’s total trade in 2022.²⁷

Additionally, Japan sees engagement and cooperation within the trilateral grouping as a means to counter China’s growing influence in the region and to maintain a stable regional order in what it officially refers to as maintaining “the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP).”²⁸ While Japan’s security strategy has increased its efforts in balancing China in several new areas, “Japan has not abandoned the engagement part of its strategy towards China,” notes Japanese scholar Ueki Chikako.²⁹

Indeed, Japan’s “Diplomatic Bluebook for 2024” highlights the “importance of dialogue between Japan and China” to pursue “mutual benefits” while increasing vigilance against Beijing’s intensifying military buildup, indicating that Japan’s “two-track” policy framework toward China largely remains.³⁰ “Economic relations between Japan and China, including trade and investment, are very close,” Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs states.³¹ There is a view that Japan’s two-track approach is driven by “a desire to create an illusion of positivity” to enhance economic ties, even though China substantively adheres to hardline positions that matter.³²

Publicly available official government texts show that South Korea's approach toward China, even under the conservative and pro-US President Yoon Suk-yeol, aligns similarly with Japan's stance on China. They state that South Korea aims to cultivate a healthier and more mature relationship with China built on "mutual respect and reciprocity."³³ For South Korea, economic interdependence is a significant factor, with China remaining as South Korea's largest trading partner.³⁴ South Korea's economic reliance on China surpasses that of Japan and the United States. According to the Federation of Korean Industries (FKI), which includes major companies like Samsung, Hyundai, SK Hynix, and LG among its 600 members, the dependency on imports of material parts from China was 29.3 percent for South Korea, 28.9 percent for Japan, and 12.9 percent for the United States, indicating that South Korea had the highest dependency.³⁵

Data from the Korea International Trade Association (KITA) further underscores South Korea's dependency on key raw materials, noting that South Korea sources all its magnesium – a crucial component in mobile device products – from China, along with 94.7 percent of tungsten oxide used in medical devices and semiconductor manufacturing and 86.2 percent of neodymium magnets that are essential for lightweight electronic products.³⁶ This significant dependence on China for critical raw materials and the intricacy of bilateral economic ties present a potential vulnerability for South Korea's manufacturing sector and overall industry, which will be examined in more detail below.

Navigating Economic Vulnerabilities

Amid rising tensions between the United States and China, South Korea is increasingly aware of its economic ties with China, which complicates its alignment with US strategy in the Indo-Pacific region and on economic security. A leaked confidential report from December 2022 by the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy (KIEP) reveals that South Korea relies on China for over 70 percent of imports of 958 key industrial materials.³⁷ Restrictions by China on these exports could have a severe impact on South Korean industries, causing disruptions across multiple supply chains.

This vulnerability is exemplified by LG Energy Solution, which supplies batteries to Tesla, a US-based electric vehicle manufacturer, and depends on China for 86.2 percent of crucial minerals like lithium carbonate and lithium hydroxide.³⁸ Restrictions or bans by China on exporting these vital resources could have extensive and far-reaching effects on South Korean industry.

A major challenge highlighted in the KIEP report is the limited alternatives available for South Korea to source materials outside of China. Out of nearly 1,000 items, fewer than 50 could be imported from Southeast Asian nations, with little prospect for significant change in the near future, according to the report.³⁹ This limitation means South Korean industries have restricted options for diversifying their supply chains away from China.

Ironically, while the Biden administration has been advocating for a reduction in supply chain dependence on China, the KIEP report suggests growing supply chain cooperation between South Korea and China. This fact underscores China's critical role as a supply chain hub and a primary source of raw materials, emphasizing the economic reality for South Korea to maintain close ties with China despite geopolitical complexities related to aligning with the United States. Similarly, FKI sternly warned that South Korean industries could face more severe impacts than their competitors if disruptions occur in supply chains linked to China.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, the semiconductor industry has been receiving significant attention as one of the critical areas of US-China rivalry.⁴¹ South Korea is one of the major powerhouses in terms of chip manufacturing, and China is a major revenue source for South Korean chip companies. In fact, China is the largest market (41 percent) for South Korean semiconductor chips. If Hong Kong (21 percent) is included, then the "Greater China" market accounts for 62 percent of South Korean chips.⁴² South Korean Minister of Trade, Industry, and Energy Ahn Duk-geun candidly admitted that there were disagreements between Seoul and Washington over the latter's continued export restrictions on semiconductor tools to China. "Our semiconductor industry has a lot of concerns about what the U.S. government is doing these days," he bluntly said.⁴³ It is rare for a South Korean senior official to publicly complain about US decisions. Washington's semiconductor export restrictions seem to have set hard parameters for Seoul regarding its economic relations with Beijing. While the push to de-risk from China is being led by the United States, Ahn's remarks reflect South Korea's sense of agency in terms of how much it wishes to cooperate with the United States. South Korea faces a dilemma in which it continues to import key industrial raw materials from China, but its alignment with US efforts and refusal to sell semiconductors to China could lead the Chinese government to retaliate by leveraging export bans against South Korea.

In 2021 and again in 2023, South Korea faced a significant urea shortage when China, the world's largest urea supplier, unexpectedly halted exports.⁴⁴ Urea is essential for reducing emissions in diesel vehicles and is also used in fertilizers. The shortage led to widespread disruptions in South Korea, including long

lines at gas stations, hoarding by consumers, and significant risks to transportation and supply chains. South Korea imported more than 90 percent of its urea from China, so it was particularly vulnerable to this crisis.⁴⁵

The political landscape in East Asia complicates and sometimes conflicts with economic interests due to China's economic influence and its use of coercive measures. The controversy over THAAD, which China strongly opposed, resulted in economic retaliation against South Korea.⁴⁶ The impact of this fallout is ongoing, as China has still not lifted “unofficial” sanctions on South Korean businesses, tourism, and K-pop performances in China. The term “unofficial” is used because the Chinese government has denied imposing economic retaliatory measures against South Korea.⁴⁷

Under President Yoon Suk-yeol, there has been a significant shift in South Korean foreign policy to align more closely with the United States. This approach contrasts with his predecessor, Moon Jae-in, whom Yoon described as “pro-China,” adding “Most South Koreans do not like China.”⁴⁸ Yoon has emphasized a clearer stance in the US-China competition and played a pivotal role in facilitating the 2023 US-South Korea-Japan trilateral summit at Camp David by unilaterally improving relations with Japan, despite 60 percent of South Koreans opposing the move.⁴⁹ “South Korea will further strengthen trilateral ties with the United States and Japan for supply chains of advanced industries,” stated Yoon's first Minister of Trade, Industry, and Energy Bang Moon-kyu. However, he also acknowledged the importance of cooperation with China by adding, “South Korea will cooperate with China as a key trade partner to navigate the intensifying Sino-U.S. technology competition.”⁵⁰ This underscores the complex balance South Korea must achieve amid these geopolitical tensions.

Aspiration for Regional Harmony

As illustrated, the role of economic factors is significant in the trilateral relationship and is often emphasized when discussing the drivers of East Asian cooperation among South Korea, Japan, and China. However, the vision for regional cooperation and unity among these three Asian states is not a recent development.

Over a century ago, Ahn Jung-geun, a prominent Korean independence activist during the Japanese colonial era, advocated for an “East Asian Peace Theory.”⁵¹ Ahn is viewed both as a patriot and a terrorist, depending on one's perspective. On the eve of Korea's colonization by Japan in 1909, he gunned down Ito Hirobumi, Japan's first Resident-General of Korea, at Harbin Railway Station in

Manchuria. For Koreans, he was a national hero who fought against Japan's militarism that subsequently led to Korea's colonization. However, for the Japanese, he was a terrorist who killed an important government official. While in prison awaiting his execution, Ahn transformed into a peace advocate.

His "Theory of East Asian Peace" highlighted the importance of peaceful coexistence and cooperation among these countries. Ahn envisioned these nations standing on equal footing, striving for common prosperity through economic and cultural exchanges rooted in their shared Confucian heritage.

In contemporary discussions, the concept of an "East Asian Community," akin to the European Union, has resurfaced. Former Japanese Prime Minister Hatoyama has been a vocal advocate for this idea, promoting regional cooperation to alleviate tensions. In an interview with the South Korean newspaper *Hankyoreh*, Hatoyama emphasized the importance of collaboration across economic, cultural, educational, and environmental domains to lay the foundation for an "EU-style East Asian bloc."⁵² He argued that Japan and South Korea should lead this effort toward "coexistence and co-prosperity," and he urged the Japanese government to more sincerely address existing disputes, such as the issue of wartime sex slaves.⁵³ Hatoyama envisions the community as a "community of non-war," representing the best path forward.

However, Hatoyama's tenure as prime minister was short-lived and marked by significant opposition, especially concerning his attempts to relocate the US Marines' Futenma airbase from Okinawa and strengthen ties with China. This drew criticism from conservative forces within Japan, ultimately leading to his resignation.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, he continued to promote East Asian integration through the East Asian Community Institute, which he founded in 2013.

Adding another dimension to regional aspirations, Chinese President Xi Jinping introduced the "New Asian Security Concept" in 2014. Xi said, "In the final analysis, it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia."⁵⁵ This vision articulated a security framework centered on "Asian solutions to Asian problems," excluding external powers and emphasizing regional autonomy in security matters. This stance was a clear signal of China's growing confidence and its desire to redefine regional security dynamics without external interference, particularly from the United States. However, Xi's approach to Asianism has been interpreted more as a demonstration of growing Chinese dominance and desire for a Sinocentric sphere of influence in Asia rather than a true vision for Asian unity based on shared cultural and historical heritage.

More Challenges and Diminishing Opportunities Ahead

In the 2000s, it was common to characterize the nations of South Korea, Japan, and China as having a three-way “division of labor” in East Asia.⁵⁶ Japan exported materials and parts to South Korea, which then developed them into components and semi-finished goods for China to assemble into finished products. Japan specialized in high-value-added products, while China focused on low-value-added products, positioning South Korea in the middle of this trilateral industrial supply chain to facilitate a seamless process.

Fears that the “division of labor” system might be breaking down have been voiced for several years. Now, they appear to be coming true, as the three countries are increasingly competing for the same industrial and market sectors, particularly in technology-driven sectors like automobiles and electronics. In the display market, for instance, South Korea overtook Japan in 2004 to occupy the number one spot in the global market share, but it handed over the throne to China in 2021.⁵⁷ China has made significant strides in several technology sectors where it has either caught up with or surpassed South Korea and Japan, including e-commerce and digital payments, high-speed rail, artificial intelligence, solar energy, telecommunications, and consumer electronics. Evidently, the division of labor they once enjoyed seems to have dissipated, gradually eroding a major impetus for the three nations to cooperate and reduce tensions.

Against this backdrop, resuming trilateral summitry between South Korea, Japan, and China is even more critical for the three countries to explore new opportunities and resuscitate momentum for cooperation in Northeast Asia while managing regional tensions. Despite increasing industrial competition, the three East Asian nations collectively account for about 20 percent of the global population, 25 percent of global GDP, and 20 percent of global trade volume, and are essential for establishing stability in the Indo-Pacific region and achieving prosperity and peace.⁵⁸ In theory, these factors should promote collaboration among the three nations.

In practice, however, multiple significant obstacles impede the full realization of trilateral cooperation. Historical grievances, particularly between Japan and its neighbors, continue to affect diplomatic relations. Furthermore, territorial disputes and diverging strategic priorities add layers of complexity. Security concerns linked to the intensifying US-China technological rivalry and US efforts to secure supply chains with allies also impact economic ties and cultural exchanges. Additionally, China’s intermittent engagement in the trilateral

framework – largely driven by its desire to counterbalance US influence – reflects its skepticism about the value of these summits, especially considering its view of South Korea and Japan as being within the US sphere of influence.

For instance, ahead of the long-anticipated trilateral summit to be hosted by South Korea in late May 2024, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning, whose diplomatic career includes a stint at the TCS office in Seoul, emphasized the importance China places on trilateral cooperation and expressed a desire to collaborate with South Korea and Japan.⁵⁹ She also noted that the three countries should jointly “create conditions” for the trilateral leaders’ meeting, though she did not specify these conditions. The state-controlled *Global Times* highlighted “external obstacles coming from Washington” as a key impediment, citing a poll where 53 percent of respondents viewed the United States as the main barrier to friendly relations between China and South Korea.⁶⁰

To navigate these complexities, the three countries must take proactive steps to foster mutual trust and understanding. Japan can match its expressions of remorse over its wartime actions with tangible measures to support the victims. Expanding cultural and educational exchanges can dismantle stereotypes and strengthen people-to-people connections. Furthermore, establishing crisis communication mechanisms and conducting joint goodwill exercises focused on disaster relief can contribute to a more stable security environment.

The role of the United States remains pivotal in managing trilateral relations. As US-China strategic competition intensifies, there is a risk that South Korea and Japan could be drawn into a new Cold War dynamic, potentially exacerbating their fragile ties with China.⁶¹ If managed skillfully, however, US involvement could stabilize the situation, reassuring its Northeast Asian allies and fostering better coordination on shared interests.

In contrast to the complex dynamics between South Korea, Japan, and China, the United States has historically served as a stabilizing force in the region and a counterweight to China’s growing influence and North Korea’s military adventurism by maintaining a strong military presence through its security alliances with South Korea and Japan. The US-Japan Security Treaty (1951 and revised in 1960) and the US-South Korea Mutual Defense Treaty (1953) form the bedrock of these alliances, committing the United States to the defense of its allies in the event of an armed attack.⁶² These security arrangements have not only provided a sense of stability and deterrence in the region but have also allowed South Korea and Japan to focus on economic development.

Similarly, China needs to foster a perception among its neighbors that having China as a partner is as advantageous and secure as the United States. However, changes in the regional power dynamics have led to a sense of uncertainty and distrust among nations. The rapid ascent of China, particularly its expanding military presence in the South China Sea, has heightened tensions. Neighboring countries continue to express skepticism toward China's assurances of peaceful development and rise.

Looking Ahead

The trilateral relationship between South Korea, Japan, and China is at a critical juncture, facing significant challenges that hinder meaningful cooperation. Historical legacies, territorial disputes, and the evolving geopolitical landscape marked by intensifying US-China rivalry have created an environment of mistrust and competition that undermines the potential for collaboration.

Public perceptions within each country also play a significant role in shaping trilateral dynamics. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2022 found that 80 percent of South Koreans and 87 percent of Japanese held unfavorable views of China.⁶³ These public sentiments are fueled by historical grievances, territorial disputes, anger over China's appropriation of Korean culture, and concerns over China's growing assertiveness, creating domestic pressures that can constrain the room for diplomatic maneuvers.

Despite the theoretical benefits of cooperation, such as economic interdependence and shared transnational issues, the reality is that domestic politics, public sentiment, strategic calculations, and external influences continue to impede progress. Historical grievances and deep-seated mistrust among the three countries remain significant barriers to building a foundation for meaningful collaboration.

Yet, from another perspective, the commitment to trilateral summitry and the establishment of the TCS represent remarkable achievements, considering the long and checkered history of tension in Northeast Asia. Since its inception in 2008, separate from the ASEAN summit, eight trilateral summits have been held in rotation among the leaders of the three countries. As of today, trilateral cooperation encompasses 71 major consultative platforms, including 21 at the ministerial level, in areas such as foreign affairs, finance, trade, environment, culture, and agriculture.⁶⁴ Most notably, the region where these three countries are located has not experienced war for over seven decades, a historical rarity.

There is potential for incremental progress through initiatives aimed at fostering mutual trust, expanding cultural exchanges, and strengthening regional institutions. However, the path ahead remains uncertain and is fraught with challenges. The role of the United States adds another layer of complexity as it seeks to reassure its allies while avoiding a new Cold War dynamic.

Moving forward, the future of the trilateral relationship will depend on the strategic choices made by leaders in Seoul, Tokyo, and Beijing. However, given the current geopolitical climate and the deep-rooted challenges, it is unlikely that we will see a significant breakthrough in trilateral cooperation in the near future. Instead, progress, if any, is likely to be slow, incremental, and subject to setbacks.

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Enhancing Trilateral Security Cooperation: Korea, the United States, and Indonesia

By Lee Sook-yeon

Introduction

The current era is characterized by the prominence of the Indo-Pacific region. The region hosts 65 percent of the world's population, contributes over 60 percent of global GDP, and plays a pivotal role in half of the world's maritime transport. Considering that approximately 85 percent of South Korea's GDP relies on foreign trade, the Indo-Pacific plays a vital role. The region represents 78 percent of South Korea's total exports and 67 percent of total imports, and the majority of South Korea's top 20 trading partners are in the Indo-Pacific. Strategic shipping routes in the region, including the South China Sea, are vital for South Korea's trade, especially as they account for around 64 percent of crude oil and 46 percent of natural gas transport.¹

In response to these geopolitical and geoeconomic realities, the Republic of Korea (ROK) unveiled its "Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific" in December 2022. The strategy underscores the ROK's commitment to a rules-based international order and its national interests in regional peace and stability. Central to South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy is its emphasis on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a strategic partner.² The relationship with ASEAN is pivotal, given the region's economic vitality, strategic maritime routes, and role in regional and global supply chains. Thus, the Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI), launched alongside the Indo-Pacific Strategy, identifies eight core lines of effort, aligned with the three key visions of freedom, peace, and prosperity.³

In particular, Indonesia, given its multifaceted strategic importance to both South Korea and the United States, is a key partner in advancing a free, open, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region. Moreover, Indonesia, as the de facto leader nation in the Southeast Asian region, has spearheaded the establishment of ASEAN and the ASEAN community, the development of the ASEAN Outlook on

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the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), and ASEAN's sub-regional cooperation in Southeast Asia (such as patrols in the Malacca Strait and the Sulu Sea).⁴ Therefore, cooperation among South Korea, the United States, and Indonesia, including efforts to enhance Indonesia's capacity as a regional leader, will contribute significantly to regional peace.

The Special Strategic Partnership between Korea and Indonesia, along with the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the United States and Indonesia, highlights Indonesia's pivotal role as a vital partner in addressing both regional and global issues. Therefore, this paper discusses trilateral cooperation among South Korea, the United States, and Indonesia in the security sector. The first section investigates existing cooperative activities between the three countries. The second section explores opportunities and potential future areas for trilateral security cooperation. Lastly, the third section discusses potential challenges that may impede future progress and considerations for developing trilateral cooperation.

The Development of Partnerships with Indonesia

Korea-Indonesia

Seoul and Jakarta officially established diplomatic ties in 1973 and have steadily strengthened them since, propelled by South Korea's economic growth and Indonesia's regional leadership. The diplomatic and defense relationship between South Korea and Indonesia, which marked its 50th anniversary in 2023, has evolved into a cornerstone of regional stability and cooperation in Southeast Asia.⁵

The bilateral relationship was elevated to a Strategic Partnership during South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun's state visit to Indonesia in December 2006, aiming to expand cooperation across political, economic, and cultural spheres.⁶ The partnership was further solidified by the bilateral creation of the Korea-Indonesia Economic Cooperation Task Force in 2007, focusing on defense and forestry.⁷ The relationship has seen substantial achievements in the area of defense, marked by South Korean exports of submarines and supersonic jets to Indonesia and a joint project to develop fighter jets.⁸ The bilateral relationship was further strengthened during the Park Geun-hye administration, highlighted by the signing of the Korea-Indonesia Defense Cooperation Agreement in 2013.⁹ Furthermore, the establishment of the cross-regional grouping of Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia (MIKTA) served to underscore the depth of this partnership.¹⁰

The New Southern Policy, initiated by the Moon Jae-in government, elevated the relationship to a Special Strategic Partnership in 2017, thereby highlighting Indonesia's significant role in South Korea's foreign policy through defense, maritime cooperation, and regional peace initiatives. Indonesia is the only Southeast Asian country to attain such a partnership status with Korea, signifying mutual trust and a shared middle-power identity.¹¹ The Korea-Indonesia Defense Cooperation Agreement, signed in 2013 and effective from September 2018, and the first two-plus-two meeting between the South Korean and Indonesian foreign and defense ministers in August 2021 underscore the two countries' commitment to enhancing defense collaboration and strategic communication.¹² The initiation of the two-plus-two meeting has notably bolstered strategic discussions on crucial topics, encompassing the establishment of a bilateral defense cooperation commission, collaborative ventures in fighter aircraft development, cybersecurity, maritime security, and counterterrorism initiatives.¹³ The Yoon Suk-yeol administration has continued to prioritize this bilateral relationship, as evidenced by reciprocal state visits demonstrating a commitment to enhancing both security and economic partnerships.¹⁴

Above all, the defense relationship and military exchanges between South Korea and Indonesia have significantly advanced, building upon the foundation of defense industry collaborations. Defense collaboration between the two nations focuses on Indonesia's military modernization plan, known as the Minimum Essential Force (MEF), aiming to strengthen its defense industry with support from South Korea through joint production and technology transfers. Particularly, bilateral cooperation in the defense industry has been a crucial area of mutual benefit, initiated by the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Defense and Military Supplies Cooperation in 1995. Since 2012, annual defense industry cooperation meetings have emphasized technology transfers and co-production. Indonesia has procured armaments such as tactical combat vehicles, submarines, and aircraft from South Korea. In return, South Korea has acquired CN-235 aircraft from Indonesia.¹⁵

Key developments so far have included South Korean exports of KT-1 training aircraft and T-50 advanced trainer jets to Indonesia, as well as joint initiatives for fighter jet development. Recent significant contracts, including the export of submarines and additional T-50 jets to Indonesia, and the joint development of KF-21 fighter jets underscore the strategic depth of the bilateral relationship. Since 2015, Korea and Indonesia have jointly funded the KF-21 project, which aims to develop 4.5-generation fighter jets, with a total budget of 8.8 trillion won through 2028.¹⁶ Presently, over 30 Indonesian technicians are employed at the Korea Aerospace Industries (KAI) factory to contribute to this project. Such

defense industry collaboration has made Indonesia one of South Korea's leading armament purchasers among ASEAN member states, alongside Indonesian efforts to modernize its primary weapons systems by 2024.¹⁷

US-Indonesia

Established in 1949, the diplomatic ties between the United States and Indonesia have evolved significantly, leading to a deep and extensive security relationship. This transformation began with the launch of the US-Indonesia Comprehensive Partnership in 2010, which was enhanced to a Strategic Partnership in 2015 and was further elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in November 2023.¹⁸ These developments demonstrate a mutual commitment to addressing global challenges and advancing peace and prosperity, grounded in shared values of democracy and pluralism. Furthermore, the two countries have developed their partnership and strengthened bilateral defense cooperation through the initiation of annual Ministerial Strategic Dialogues and other high-level engagements, with the aim of addressing international security challenges. This includes the first-ever senior officials' two-plus-two dialogue in October 2023, which emphasized US support for the modernization of Indonesia's defense forces.

Strategic ties between Indonesia and the United States, similar to those between Indonesia and Korea, have been significantly shaped by arms procurement, with a particular focus on aviation assets. Over \$3.1 billion in US arms were exported to Indonesia from 1950 to 2022, encompassing airplanes, helicopters, and missiles.¹⁹ Between 2012 and 2021, 21 arms procurement agreements were signed, and active sales under the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) system amounted to \$1.88 billion.²⁰ Notable FMS cases include various fighter aircrafts and missiles, culminating in the approval in 2022 of a possible sale of F-15 aircraft and equipment worth an estimated \$13.9 billion. In 2023, further defense agreements were made, including the sale of 24 S-70 Blackhawk helicopters and 24 F-15 fighters, emphasizing military modernization and the deepening of interoperability between the two nations.²¹

The United States and Indonesia have developed a robust military partnership characterized by over 200 annual military exchanges, including significant exercises such as Super Garuda Shield.²² The Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) and Cope West exercises further solidify this partnership.²³ They focus on enhancing maritime and air-to-air training capabilities, addressing both traditional and non-traditional security challenges in the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, the 2023 Keris Marine Exercise (MAREX) marked the first marine

corps exercise between the two countries.²⁴ These exercises demonstrate the depth of interoperability and commitment to regional security cooperation between the United States and Indonesia, encompassing a range of activities from subject-matter expert exchanges to large-scale, multilateral drills.

Educational exchange programs between Indonesia and the United States are a crucial component of the bilateral defense relationship. Since 1970, over 7,000 Indonesian military and civilian personnel have received education in the United States, investing more than \$130 million in these programs. Indonesian institutions have also educated over 100 American military officers.²⁵ In November 2022, the defense ministers of the United States and Indonesia discussed security initiatives, including professional military education, Indonesian force modernization, and cooperation in the maritime domain, as key cooperative endeavors. The ministers also agreed to expand bilateral military training and education by hosting new language training courses and expanding cooperation for emerging defense leaders.²⁶

The recent focal point of interest between the United States and Indonesia centers on maritime security cooperation. The United States and Indonesia signed an MOU on maritime cooperation in 2015.²⁷ Although this agreement did not directly address traditional security-related matters, the United States has played a crucial role in supporting Indonesia's maritime law enforcement capabilities by constructing a maritime training center on Batam Island and implementing joint training programs with the US Coast Guard.²⁸ Furthermore, during the US-Indonesia summit in November 2022, commitments were made to support Indonesia's monitoring program for Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, including the acquisition of drones. These efforts underscore a broader US strategy aimed at enhancing maritime security, safeguarding maritime domains, and promoting sustainable fishing practices, reflecting the comprehensive nature of US-Indonesia defense collaboration.²⁹

Exploring Emerging Prospects in Trilateral Security Cooperation

As previously discussed, South Korea-Indonesia and US-Indonesia security relations have significantly deepened over time. However, trilateral security cooperation among the three countries remains unexplored. This is mainly because the US-Indonesia relationship encompasses a wide range of activities, such as bilateral and multilateral military training, arms procurement, military education, and maritime security, while collaboration between South Korea and Indonesia has primarily centered on the defense industry. Furthermore, it was only after the initiation of the New Southern Policy in 2017 that South Korea

enhanced its comprehensive relationships with Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia. However, even within the framework of the New Southern Policy, critiques emerged that suggested South Korea's engagement with Southeast Asia prioritized economic, socio-cultural, and people-to-people exchanges over the political-security sector.³⁰ Although South Korea has consistently expressed its intention to strengthen security cooperation with Southeast Asian countries through initiatives such as the New Southern Policy, the recent Indo-Pacific Strategy, and the Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative, concrete actions have only recently begun to materialize.

Thus, in which specific areas could these three countries begin to explore security cooperation? The defense industry and arms purchases stand out as prominent areas within each bilateral relationship. However, these sectors may not serve as feasible starting points for trilateral security cooperation due to the numerous stakeholders and complexity of the processes involved, in addition to the significant level of political trust required. Another important consideration is acknowledging and respecting Indonesia's neutrality and its reluctance to align with major powers in ways that might antagonize China. South Korea, too, shares concerns about straining relations with China, as its Indo-Pacific strategy explicitly states that it "neither targets nor excludes any specific nation."³¹ Therefore, adopting a cautious approach that ensures military sensitivity is crucial to establishing trilateral cooperation. In this context, initiating cooperation in maritime security and counterterrorism provides a practical foundation for expanded collaboration.

Maritime Security Cooperation

South Korea's commitment to enhancing regional stability and security, especially in the maritime domain, is clearly demonstrated through its evolving relationship with ASEAN countries and strategic initiatives. The collaboration gained momentum in 2017 when South Korea decided to strengthen defense ties with Southeast Asian nations, thereby significantly increasing resources dedicated to maritime security. This effort was further emphasized in its Indo-Pacific Strategy, which focuses on expanding security cooperation, protecting Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC), fostering peace in the South China Sea, and ensuring freedom of navigation. It also emphasizes addressing comprehensive security challenges and fostering cooperation with ASEAN on those issues.³² The Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative also demonstrates South Korea's commitment to maritime security cooperation. KASI focuses on maritime law enforcement, joint naval exercises, and environmental protection, aligning with the Indo-Pacific Strategy's objective of upholding the rules-based international order.³³

Indonesia, as the largest ASEAN maritime nation, confronts various maritime threats like illegal fishing, piracy, and territorial violations. Estimates suggest that illegal fishing activities cost Jakarta at least \$3 billion annually in lost revenue.³⁴ Despite ongoing efforts by ASEAN member states, the threat of piracy and armed robbery against ships continues to affect the region. There was a marginal increase in incidents in the waters around the Strait of Malacca, Singapore, and the South China Sea in 2022.³⁵ Above all, protecting its maritime territory remains a significant challenge for Indonesia, especially amidst conflicts in the South China Sea. Chinese vessels and unmanned submarines and drones intruding into Indonesian waters, particularly in the Natuna Sea, pose a threat to its sovereignty.³⁶ Key events, such as Indonesian President Joko Widodo's 2016 meeting aboard a warship in the Natuna Islands, demonstrated Indonesia's resolve to safeguard its maritime sovereignty.³⁷ In 2014, President Widodo introduced the Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) vision and devised a comprehensive maritime security strategy structured around seven pillars.³⁸ The significance of maritime cooperation to Indonesia is evident through initiatives such as the 2019 ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and the 2023 ASEAN Maritime Outlook (AMO).³⁹

Enhancing Maritime Law Enforcement Capacity

In the Indo-Pacific, characterized by complex geopolitics and significant maritime activity, collaboration among coast guards plays a pivotal role in ensuring maritime security. It serves as a strategic and effective approach to address the region's diverse and transnational challenges. In light of the strategic competition among major powers, coast guard-led initiatives are preferred over traditional military measures to avoid provocation. This approach is also emphasized in South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy, which acknowledges the vital contribution of coast guard cooperation in tackling maritime challenges and combating transnational crime.⁴⁰

In response to maritime security challenges, Indonesia established its coast guard, known as Bakamla, in 2014, consolidating diverse maritime functions across several ministries.⁴¹ As a newly formed agency facing shortages in resources, personnel, and expertise, the Indonesian Coast Guard needs cooperation with the more experienced US and South Korean coast guards to strengthen its capabilities. A practical step for enhancing this trilateral cooperation involves consolidating the separate training support provided by South Korea and the United States into a more cooperative and comprehensive program for the Indonesia Coast Guard.

In 2018, the coast guards of Korea and Indonesia signed a Maritime Security Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the aim of enhancing the capabilities of both countries' coast guards. This agreement specifically encompasses cooperation on joint training programs, supporting the establishment of Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) systems, information sharing, and providing training support for Indonesian officers.⁴² The United States contributed \$3.5 million to support the construction of a coast guard training center in Batam, Indonesia, along with additional education and training resources.⁴³ Additionally, on April 2, 2024, the Commander of the US Coast Guard Pacific Area and the Commissioner General of the Korea Coast Guard signed a bilateral joint statement enhancing collaborative efforts between the two agencies and pledged to extend this cooperation to include multilateral ties with Vietnam, Indonesia, Australia, and India.⁴⁴ These efforts aim not only to enhance Indonesia's coast guard facilities and equipment but also to cultivate skilled maritime law enforcement personnel and promote operational cooperation among the coast guards of the involved countries. Therefore, each avenue of bilateral cooperation can easily develop into trilateral engagement.

Expanding Trilateral Maritime Exercises

Regular and institutionalized joint exercises are crucial for enhancing international cooperation, technology exchange, and operational readiness among the navies and coast guards of participating nations. These exercises play a key role in bolstering maritime security and safety through mutual learning and increased interoperability. The perception of such military drills by neighboring countries, however, is nuanced and influenced by various factors such as its purpose, scenarios, scale of participation, and locations. Therefore, it is desirable for joint military exercises among the three nations to commence with sensitive and low-scale training that gradually expand and evolve over time.

First, the three countries could initiate exchanges and drills to enhance technical capabilities, facilitate the sharing of best practices, and strengthen relational ties. Activities would include search-and-rescue operations, maritime law enforcement, environmental conservation, and ensuring navigational safety. Another approach is to expand bilateral naval exercises between the United States and Indonesia and between South Korea and Indonesia into trilateral exercises. Although South Korea and Indonesia have not yet engaged in any regular bilateral exercises, Korea plans to conduct a joint submarine escape-and-rescue exercise with Indonesia in 2024. Indonesia had aimed to broaden its search-and-rescue training following the sinking of the KRI Nanggala

402 submarine.⁴⁵ Furthermore, given that South Korea and the United States have conducted bilateral diving exercises since 2021, it is appropriate to expand search-and-rescue exercises for sunken vessels to include all three countries.⁴⁶ Expanding the US-Indonesia Keris MAREX marine corps exercise to include Korea would also be valuable. Given Indonesia's archipelagic nature, this cooperation is vital and has the potential to evolve into large-scale exercises akin to the Cobra Gold exercise.⁴⁷

Enhancing MDA Capability and Information Exchange

Since the 9/11 terrorist attack, the United States has expanded its focus on security threats, particularly in maritime domains, leading to the development of national strategies centered on Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). This initiative is aimed at countering security challenges, including those posed by China, and emphasizes international collaboration for real-time monitoring, analysis, and prediction of maritime situations affecting security, safety, environmental, and economic interests.⁴⁸ When the United States and Indonesia elevated their relationship by establishing a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2023, the United States announced its commitment to dedicating over \$5 million to enhance MDA and maritime law enforcement in Indonesia.⁴⁹ This initiative underscores the crucial significance of cooperation and support in MDA for Indonesia, a nation confronted with substantial maritime threats, including transnational crimes, maritime accidents and disasters, IUU fishing, tsunamis, and other large-scale natural disasters.

South Korea, recognizing the significance of MDA and its necessity for international cooperation, is promoting the Korean MDA System as an intergovernmental project.⁵⁰ It considers regional and international MDA cooperation and information-sharing to be highly significant. In this regard, the synergy among the United States, South Korea, and Indonesia is notable. The exchange of satellite detection information and regional maritime data among these nations can refine Southeast Asia's maritime situational awareness and strengthen Indonesia's capability to utilize satellite and digital information. Especially given the importance of the Malacca Strait, enhancing the capabilities of the Indonesia Maritime Information Centre, alongside the Singapore Information Fusion Centre, and facilitating the sharing of maritime information are crucial. Furthermore, the three countries should expand their cooperation by establishing a regional MDA network, which can support joint monitoring, expert education and capacity building, the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), disaster response training, and collaborative environmental monitoring.⁵¹ However, this collaboration ultimately

needs to extend beyond enhancing detection and monitoring systems and information sharing to include unmanned surveillance expansion, joint efforts in policy development, and strategic dialogue.

Counterterrorism Cooperation

Indonesia is home to the largest Muslim-majority population in Asia, with around 220 million Muslims out of a total population of 250 million, and has become a significant focus for ISIS recruitment efforts.⁵² The distinction of hosting Asia's largest Muslim population and the presence of numerous radical Islamic groups within its borders have made Indonesia a prime target for ISIS. Despite lacking an established organizational structure in Indonesia, ISIS has presumably networked with various jihadist groups long present in the country. This is part of a broader trend of growing violent and radical Islamic forces in Indonesia, such as Laskar Jihad and Jemaah Islamiyah, since the late 1990s. Following the decline of Jemaah Islamiyah, smaller factions have emerged, pledging support to ISIS and engaging in terror activities both domestically and internationally. High-profile attacks include the 2002 Bali bombings, the 2009 Jakarta hotel bombings, and the 2016 downtown Jakarta attacks. The incident in 2016, in particular, increased the regional terrorism threat, leading to heightened security measures across Southeast Asia.⁵³

However, amidst these security challenges, Indonesia has successfully integrated Islamic principles with democratic governance. This stance has garnered attention from the United States, which emphasizes counterterrorism cooperation with Indonesia. Despite historical tensions arising from human rights violations by Indonesian special forces, such as the Santa Cruz Massacre and abuses in Aceh and West Papua, relations between the United States and Indonesia thawed in the post-9/11 era. In 2002, the United States included Indonesia in the Regional Defense Combating Terrorism Fellowship Program, marking the beginning of restored military and defense engagement. The United States lifted an arms embargo in 2005 and resumed ties with Kopassus (Indonesian Special Forces) in 2010, following significant reforms implemented after the Suharto dictatorship.⁵⁴

Both the United States and South Korea identify counterterrorism as a pivotal area of cooperation with Indonesia. South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy commits to expanding counterterrorism exercises and capacity-building efforts across the region. The collaboration among the three countries on counterterrorism could begin with the exchange of specialized agencies dedicated to counterterrorism, the establishment of expert forums, and capacity-building through counterterrorism training and education.

Initially, such collaboration could begin with an exchange between the national counterterrorism centers of the three countries. South Korea operates the Counterterrorism Center directly under the Prime Minister's Office, which is responsible for developing national standard manuals, assessing readiness for counterterrorism, and coordinating international cooperation. Additionally, the center conducts an annual National Counterterrorism Comprehensive Training.⁵⁵ Should the United States and Indonesia participate in South Korea's national training program to discuss and coordinate counterterrorism response systems, it would present a valuable opportunity to enhance the response capabilities of each participating country and the region. In this way, if the three countries engage in exchanges centered around their national counterterrorism centers, it would not only contribute to regional stability but also aid in the advancement of one's own counterterrorism response capabilities.

Building upon collaboration between respective counterterrorism centers, the three countries could establish a counterterrorism forum and, furthermore, jointly host a forum for regional nations, thereby expanding expert exchanges. On November 3, 2023, South Korea and Indonesia jointly convened the Korea-Indonesia Counter-Terrorism Seminar to facilitate the sharing of expertise and best practices in counterterrorism between the two countries to strengthen capacity-building.⁵⁶ To expand such efforts, the three countries should develop a plan for establishing a new trilateral counterterrorism forum. Furthermore, it is conceivable for the three countries to collaborate on enhancing counterterrorism capacities across the Southeast Asian region. A notable example is the ASEAN Aviation Security Workshop Series jointly organized by the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the US Department of State, and the Indonesia National Counter Terrorism Agency (BNPT) in November 2021. This event featured not only experts from South Korea and the United States but also from international organizations such as the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (OCT) and the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), disseminating diverse information and expertise to over 60 representatives from ASEAN member states.⁵⁷ If the three countries collaboratively host a forum that includes regional nations and international organizations on a regular basis, they could significantly enhance regional counterterrorism capabilities and promote the exchange of expertise.

Conducting joint military exercises is also crucial. Initiating Korean participation in exercises such as the annual US-Indonesia Garuda Shield joint exercise, as well as the US-led Southeast Asia Cooperation and Training (SEACAT) for maritime security – where Korea is currently only an observer – could serve as a starting point. In particular, the Special Operations Forces and Marine Corps

of ROK and the US are globally renowned for their expertise in counterterrorism capabilities.⁵⁸ Therefore, joint exercises involving trilateral counterterrorism forces will contribute to enhancing Indonesia's capabilities. Furthermore, by sending officers for training at special forces institutions in South Korea and the United States, Indonesia could further develop their expertise.

Trilateral Security Cooperation in a Multilateral Context

Establishing cooperation solely among these three countries can be more challenging than pursuing multilateral collaboration, regardless of the specific areas involved. While South Korea has recently initiated trilateral cooperation with the United States and Japan, it has predominantly focused on its bilateral relationship with the United States and has limited experience in trilateral security cooperation. Indonesia prefers ASEAN-based multilateral efforts or sub-regional collaboration with neighboring countries. Moreover, even if the cooperation aims to address common non-traditional security threats, Indonesia may hesitate to engage in an initiative that is US-centric. South Korea might also share this reluctance. Therefore, a strategy of pursuing more inclusive multilateral cooperation involving additional Southeast Asian nations, led by the United States, South Korea, and Indonesia, may prove more effective.

One of the primary objectives of security cooperation is to enhance the response capability of each Southeast Asian country and the regional collective capability more broadly in addressing a range of critical issues. The most feasible starting point to achieve this objective would be for South Korea to participate in and actively contribute to initiatives that the United States is currently promoting across Southeast Asia. In this context, Indonesia could play a pivotal role in fostering tighter linkages among Southeast Asian nations within the multilateral cooperative framework. Moreover, trilateral cooperation within a multilateral framework could enhance Indonesia's role and participation while possibly addressing China's concerns. Such efforts, whether they pertain to maritime security or counterterrorism, are equally applicable in a multilateral context.

Using MDA cooperation as an example, South Korea could actively engage in initiatives such as the Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative, initiated by the United States in 2016, or the Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative (MSI).⁵⁹ Similarly, South Korea has the potential to contribute to the Sustainable Fish Asia (SuFia) Project, announced at the 2023 US-ASEAN summit, which aims to combat IUU fishing.⁶⁰ Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy emphasizes MDA cooperation and underscores maritime security collaboration, particularly with Southeast Asian and Pacific Island nations. Therefore, even though Korea is not

a QUAD member, it can participate in IPMDA cooperation as well. To facilitate this, the United States should expand the scope of IPMDA from its QUAD-specific focus to a more inclusive regional initiative that incorporates additional participating nations. However, when Korea participates in US multilateral initiatives, it is crucial for Seoul and Washington to define a direction for mutual role-sharing to maximize Korea's strengths and compensate for its weaknesses with support from the United States.

Another approach would be to establish a US-Korea-Indonesia program, similar to the US-Japan-Philippines one. In April 2022, the coast guards of the United States, Japan, and the Philippines launched a program aimed at enhancing the capabilities of the Philippine Coast Guard through joint training. By December 2023, this training evolved into a multinational cooperative effort that included Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam.⁶¹ Similar to the US-Japan collaborative efforts, which initially focused on the Philippines before its expansion, a comparable capacity-building initiative involving the United States, Korea, and Indonesia could be developed and potentially expanded to include other Southeast Asian countries. Such an approach is highly feasible and strategically advantageous. Similarly, China has also expanded its Aman Youyi (Peace and Friendship) anti-terrorism exercise, which started with Malaysia in 2014 and expanded to include Thailand by 2018. Later, it extended to Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos by 2023, facilitating extensive multilateral training.⁶²

Challenges and Future Directions for Trilateral Cooperation

In the security sector, the primary challenge for trilateral cooperation among the ROK, the United States, and Indonesia is to maintain mutual trust. Specifically, the potential to initiate, sustain, and advance this collaboration depends on the strong commitment of leaders from all three countries and their willingness to establish mutual trust as the foundation for this endeavor. However, the diverse core interests and foreign security strategies of each country, coupled with the possibility of policy shifts resulting from election outcomes, may pose significant obstacles to this cooperation.

South Korea

Until now, South Korea limited the regional scope of its national interests to the Korean Peninsula at its narrowest and Northeast Asia at its broadest, with variations across different governments.⁶³ The Yoon Suk-yeol administration has expanded the geographical scope of its foreign strategy beyond that of the Moon Jae-in administration and previous conservative governments by encompassing the entire Indo-Pacific region. The Yoon administration's strategy

expresses a willingness to enhance Korea's role and contributions within this area. However, approximately one and a half years after the announcement of Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy, domestic skepticism persists regarding Korea's ability to make significant contributions to the peace and prosperity of the entire region, given limited resources and capabilities and other competing strategic demands and vulnerabilities. Central to these discussions are two critical issues: deterring North Korea and managing relations with China.

North Korea has escalated its military provocations, including missile tests, by legalizing the preemptive use of nuclear weapons in 2023 and designating South Korea as its "No. 1 hostile country" in the North Korean constitution in February 2024.⁶⁴ After Putin's victory of a fifth term in March 2024, and if military cooperation between North Korea and Russia increases, South Korea will need to allocate more diplomatic and defense resources to counter North Korea. This may further limit its ability to contribute to regional issues, potentially diminishing cooperation.⁶⁵ Additionally, while the Yoon Suk-yeol administration aims to strengthen its alliance with the United States, enhance trilateral cooperation with Japan, and build ties with like-minded countries, many in Korea still advocate for a more balanced approach toward China, given significant bilateral economic ties and the need to effectively address North Korea's military provocations. This perspective is also reflected in the Yoon administration's strategic documents. In the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the term "China" is mentioned only twice, apart from the context of ROK-Japan-China trilateral cooperation. South Korea's National Security Strategy, released in June 2023, assesses regional and global threats not in terms of Chinese aggressiveness but rather in the context of "intensifying U.S.-China competition in the diplomatic, economic, and military spheres."⁶⁶ Although the document clearly states opposition to unilateral changes to the status quo by force, Korea often adopts ambiguous positions regarding China, potentially undermining the credibility of its Indo-Pacific Strategy.

Another critical factor for consideration is domestic politics. The outcome of the recent South Korean general election in April is unlikely to significantly alter President Yoon's foreign policy trajectory, as his approach has been consistent and not driven by populism. However, opposition parties that advocate for a more neutral stance on global issues, including the Taiwan Strait and the Ukraine war, are expected to challenge Yoon's Indo-Pacific Strategy.⁶⁷ Moreover, following the election defeat, his focus will likely shift toward domestic concerns within an opposition-dominated National Assembly. This shift could potentially erode confidence among international partners regarding his ability to maintain public support and effectively implement the Indo-Pacific Strategy.⁶⁸

The United States

The United States may also undergo significant policy changes and shift toward a decreased willingness to engage in certain Indo-Pacific initiatives. Should the 2024 US presidential election result in a president who prioritizes US interests over global leadership, support and attention toward Southeast Asia may diminish. Such a scenario already unfolded during the Trump administration. While the Obama administration had garnered significant trust from ASEAN countries through its “Pivot to Asia” policy, Trump consistently absented himself from ASEAN-based summits and did not meaningfully engage with Southeast Asian countries. As a result, trust in the United States among Southeast Asian nations significantly diminished, necessitating considerable efforts from the Biden administration to restore it.⁶⁹

Whether in the case of South Korea or the United States, a significant shift in engagement levels with Southeast Asia is likely to erode Indonesia's political trust in these countries, subsequently diminishing the momentum for potential trilateral cooperation among them. The results of a survey by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute's ASEAN Studies Centre illustrate this clearly. The survey shows a positive correlation between Indonesians' assessment of the level of US engagement in Southeast Asia and their view of US reliability as a strategic partner; the more engaged the United States appears to be, the more reliable a strategic partner Indonesians see it as. The difference between the perception of US engagement at the end of the Trump administration versus the start of the Biden administration is rather stark. In Trump's final year in office, roughly 80 percent of respondents viewed US engagement either as having decreased or decreased substantially, with nearly 60 percent having little or no confidence in US reliability as a strategic partner. In Biden's first year, the survey showed a significant turn in such sentiments, with over 70 percent of respondents viewing US engagement as having increased or increased substantially, and over 50 percent being confident or very confident in US reliability with less than 25 percent having little or no confidence.⁷⁰

It is noteworthy, however, that Indonesian sentiment has palpably shifted in recent years regarding the Biden administration's engagement with Southeast Asia. In 2024, almost 38 percent of respondents viewed US engagement with Southeast Asia as having decreased or decreased significantly since the previous year, with over 60 percent of the respondents feeling that the United States is not as reliable (compared to 51.2 percent in 2023 and 36.6 percent in 2022).⁷¹

In the event of escalating strategic competition between the United States and China that prompts the former to intensify its efforts to counter the latter through alliances and partnerships, Indonesia, which has traditionally maintained a neutral diplomatic stance, and South Korea, which may be hesitant to engage in efforts aimed at containing China, might both show significant reluctance to continue robust trilateral cooperation. However, should China's unilateral actions and coercion intensify, the likelihood of strengthened and expanded cooperation among the three countries could correspondingly increase. This potential is primarily due to significant public resentment and distrust in Korea and Indonesia toward China's aggressiveness and breaches of sovereignty.

In a 2024 survey, almost half of the Indonesian respondents expressed either little confidence (39.6 percent) or no confidence (9.4 percent) in China's actions contributing to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance. Among those who distrust China, 42.3 percent attribute this sentiment to concerns that China's economic and military power could be used to threaten Indonesia's interests and sovereignty.⁷² The foremost desire among respondents with a pessimistic view of China-Indonesia relations is for China to resolve all territorial and maritime disputes peacefully in accordance with international law, with an increase from 72.2 percent in 2023 to 78.6 percent in 2024.⁷³

In Korea, there is also growing skepticism and concern about China. According to the Pew Research Center, South Koreans were relatively positive about China in 2015, with only 37 percent holding unfavorable views.⁷⁴ However, a survey by the Central European Institute of Asian Studies in 2022 indicated that Korean attitudes toward China turned sharply negative in the following years, primarily due to tensions in bilateral relations surrounding the 2016 announced deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system. In South Korea, China is the most negatively viewed country, with 81 percent of respondents, followed by Russia (77 percent) and North Korea (69 percent).⁷⁵ Furthermore, another survey results indicate that South Korea (81 percent) has the highest proportion of respondents perceiving China negatively, exceeding the proportions in Japan (69 percent) and Taiwan (62 percent).⁷⁶

Indonesia

Prabowo Subianto, who is set to assume office as the new president of Indonesia in October 2024, is expected to maintain the foreign and economic policies of the previous administration, having been elected with the support

of the current leader, President Joko Widodo. However, during his military service, he was implicated in suppressing pro-democracy activists under the Suharto regime and committing human rights abuses in conflict areas like Papua and East Timor.⁷⁷ These actions led to a nearly twenty-year ban from entering the United States, which was lifted when he became Minister of Defense in 2020. However, the United States' subsequent collaboration with Subianto in his ministerial role suggests that his past may not significantly impact bilateral ties between the United States and Indonesia or impede potential trilateral relations with South Korea. Nonetheless, it is imperative for Indonesia to recognize that both the United States and South Korea prioritize universal values, including democracy and human rights, as fundamental aspects of their foreign policy strategies.

Another critical consideration is that Indonesia's aspirations for economic development compel it to seek favorable relations with both Beijing and Washington, necessitating Jakarta's navigation of a delicate balance. Being pragmatic, Prabowo is expected to uphold the country's economic relationship with China, established by prior administrations, while concurrently leveraging Indonesia's non-aligned stance to derive benefits from both the United States and China.⁷⁸ In August 2023, following the issuance of a joint US and Indonesian defense ministerial press statement by the US Department of Defense, which contained criticisms of China and Russia, Prabowo refuted the statement's existence, highlighting, "Our relationship with China is very positive. We hold mutual respect and understanding."⁷⁹ In 2023, the budget allocation for defense increased by 3.2 percent compared to 2022, reaching approximately \$13.6 billion, which made it the largest single allocation in the budget.⁸⁰ However, Chinese aggression is not the primary driver of Indonesia's military modernization efforts. Numerous Southeast Asian nations, including Indonesia, have undertaken military modernization campaigns for decades, but their main aim is to bolster self-defense rather than balancing and countering China.⁸¹

Prabowo will not choose sides in the US-China competition. Despite its concerns about China, Indonesia is apprehensive about US efforts to build a regional anti-China coalition undermining its relationship with Beijing. Especially as Indonesia joins the ranks of Asia's rising powers, it will prioritize strategic independence.⁸² Indonesia aims to protect its interests while avoiding entanglement in the strategic competition between the United States and China. Indonesian policies might lead the United States to perceive Indonesia as a less reliable and effective partner compared to the Philippines or Vietnam, potentially challenging the continuity of trilateral cooperation between the United States, Korea, and Indonesia.

From Korea's perspective, the KF-21 Boramae fighter jet project significantly affects Indonesia's credibility. According to a 2016 agreement, Indonesia committed to funding 20 percent of the project costs, totaling 1.6 trillion won, by June 2026 for the development of the KF-21 fighter jet. As of March 2024, Indonesia has contributed only 278.3 billion won and has requested to extend the payment deadline to 2034. This financial inconsistency, coupled with alleged attempts by Indonesian engineers to leak confidential data about the aircraft in January 2024, has greatly diminished the trust between South Korea and Indonesia.⁸³ Indonesia intensified doubts about the KF-21 project when it signed a contract in February 2022 to acquire 42 Rafale fighters from France. Furthermore, although the contract was eventually scrapped, Indonesia had agreed in June 2023 to purchase 12 used Mirage 2000-5 fighters from Qatar for approximately 1 trillion won.⁸⁴ In early May this year, Indonesia finally proposed reducing its financial contribution to the KF-21 project to about one-third of the originally agreed amount. Although the Korean government is expected to accept this proposal in the national interest, it might undermine trust between the two countries, particularly concerning issues such as the provision of prototypes and the level of technology transfer.⁸⁵

Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific region is increasingly recognized for its geopolitical and geoeconomic significance. However, the expansion of instability and threats from various forces is also evident. Within this context, Southeast Asia's importance has increased, and Indonesia's role in ensuring regional peace and prosperity is expected to expand. Consequently, South Korea has established a Special Strategic Partnership with Indonesia, the only ASEAN country with which it has such a relationship, and the United States has formed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with Indonesia, highlighting that both nations seek to enhance their multifaceted relationships.

However, Indonesia prioritizes taking a leading role in addressing regional issues while maintaining neutrality among major powers. This approach is exemplified by its decision not to involve major powers like the United States in coordinating joint patrols with littoral states, aimed at mitigating threats such as piracy and transnational crime in the Strait of Malacca.⁸⁶

Given South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy, which emphasizes inclusivity and avoids antagonizing any nation, Indonesia can serve as an ideal partner for South Korea, particularly in the context of enhancing security cooperation within Southeast Asia. Such cooperation can and does include the United

States. Yet, as there has been limited security cooperation involving all three countries to date, it is advisable to start with comprehensive security issues, such as maritime security and counterterrorism, before gradually expanding to additional areas. This approach not only meets Indonesia's pressing cooperative needs but also aligns with the areas where both the United States and South Korea have committed to enhancing cooperation with Indonesia.

However, differences in their respective core interests – South Korea's intense focus on the Korean Peninsula, the United States' emphasis on strategic competition with China, and Indonesia's adherence to an independent and active foreign policy – could potentially limit the expansion of strategic cooperation among the three countries. Therefore, it is essential for the three countries to persist in enhancing their strategic dialogues to foster deeper comprehension of each other's fundamental interests. These efforts are crucial for the development of mutual trust and for establishing a reliable security partnership among them. Furthermore, as this cooperation gradually strengthens, it will become possible to expand both the scope and depth of cooperation, thus contributing to the preservation of a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region.

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Opportunities for Cooperation between Vietnam, the United States, and the Republic of Korea: A Vietnamese Perspective

By Vu Le Thai Hoang and Nguyen Thi Bich Ngoc

Introduction

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous challenges facing small- and medium-sized countries have given rise to new formats of cooperation as alternatives to existing multilateral mechanisms. The intensification of major power rivalry has led to a fragmentation of multilateralism at the global level, which, in turn, has necessitated countries to utilize minilateral mechanisms to cope with emerging issues such as the disruption of supply chains, geopolitical conflicts, and non-traditional threats. Amidst the resurgence of minilateralism in the post-COVID-19 context, trilateralism has become the most popular grouping format not only between the United States and its allies but also between middle powers. Using the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis framework, this article examines Vietnam's approach to trilateralism and the feasibility of trilateral cooperation between Vietnam, the United States, and the Republic of Korea (ROK) based on Vietnam's long-term development goals.

Overview of Trilateralism in the Indo-Pacific

Known as the miniature of minilateralism, the advantages of trilateralism have long been acknowledged by scholars and practitioners. According to Alison Szalwinski and Michelle Cho, "coordination between three partners generates strength in numbers, resources, and geographic scope."¹ In terms of quantity, the low number of members for a minilateral grouping will save time within the decision-making process and create a compact framework that is capable of developing action plans and enhancing efficient and timely implementation. Trilateral mechanisms also help member states mobilize financial and human resources for costly projects focusing on a specific area of cooperation. Although geography is not a compulsory criterion for a trilateral arrangement, similar locations for conducting joint activities help explain objectives and member states' visions for the respective region. The advantages of trilateralism make it a good choice for countries that desire concrete deliverables for joint efforts and maximizing benefits based on shared interests.

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For several decades, trilateralism has been associated with a number of groupings founded by the United States and its allies, such as US-Japan-ROK cooperation, the US-Japan-Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD), and the Australia-UK-US partnership (AUKUS), among others. All of these mechanisms are characterized by a strong commitment between treaty allies and an emphasis on strategic and security collaboration. These features create both opportunities and costs for the US-led trilateral mechanisms. On the one hand, treaty commitments lay a solid platform for cooperation and help synergize trilateral arrangements and the network of US alliances more broadly. Focusing on strategic and security realms enables the rational allocation of resources and division of labor for joint projects. On the other hand, revitalizing trilateralism in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly US-Japan-ROK cooperation, will likely increase tension around regional hot spots, undermining the confidence of regional countries toward an external major power. Moreover, experts have warned policymakers of the trilateralism dilemma, which could make cooperation counterproductive because “increasing integration [leads] to operational dependency” between members.²

Due to the US-China competition, China has criticized US-led minilateral arrangements as “attempts to bring blocs of confrontation into the Asia Pacific.”³ Nevertheless, China joined a trilateral mechanism for summit-level dialogue with Japan and the ROK and maintained its participation in trilateral meetings with Russia and India. Along with its increasing economic influence, China has initiated trilateral cooperation with developing countries and international organizations, while avoiding describing these arrangements as cases of trilateralism. In reality, China has the most diverse network of trilateral cooperative mechanisms with developed and developing countries. Most of the trilateral frameworks with China’s membership prioritize development cooperation, which reflects China’s diplomacy to win the hearts and minds of developing countries for long-term global leadership. China also proactively engages with international organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and the International Labor Organization (ILO) on projects focusing on sustainable development issues.⁴ By doing so, China combines resources from international mechanisms with Chinese technical support and expertise to implement their initiatives. Therefore, Chinese-led trilateral frameworks benefit from their attractiveness to developing countries that desperately need resources and experience. However, the Chinese model of trilateralism lacks institutionalization and long-term commitment from member countries.

Apart from trilateral frameworks led by major powers, minilateral groupings have become increasingly popular among middle powers in the Indo-Pacific region. The proliferation of middle-power trilateralism over the last decade is explained by their pursuit of strategic autonomy amid geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China. By establishing minilateral arrangements without the participation of major powers, middle powers seek to increase independent decision-making by promoting cooperation among themselves. The main strength of middle-power trilateralism is that it can serve as a tool for navigating major power rivalry and avoiding over-reliance on them.⁵ As one of the most active countries in this space, India is involved in the highest number of trilateral groupings with middle powers.⁶ These minilateral arrangements help strengthen India's role in the evolving regional architecture of the Indo-Pacific and address a wide range of traditional and non-traditional security issues. In addition, experts have noted that the absence of specific themes and issue areas within the grouping can sometimes weaken middle-power trilateralism. Therefore, an outcome-oriented approach that focuses on distinct areas of cooperation is important for successful minilateralism.⁷

Trilateralism from the Vietnamese Perspective

Vietnam's approach to minilateralism is shaped by its national development strategy and the fundamental principles of Vietnamese foreign policy from the Renovation (Đổi Mới) period, namely independence, self-reliance, diversification, and multilateralization. Such principles were reaffirmed consistently in resolutions by the Vietnamese Communist Party since the 6th Party Congress in December 1986.⁸ After 30 years of war and a decade of isolation and embargo, the beginning of the Renovation period marked a breakthrough in the evolution of Vietnam's foreign policy. Since then, Vietnam repositioned itself as not only a socialist country, but also a friend to all countries. From the 6th Party Congress in 1986 to the 11th Party Congress in 2011, the motto of Vietnam's foreign policy was gradually developed and finalized as "Vietnam is a friend, a reliable partner and a responsible member of the international community."

Vietnam's foreign policy during the Renovation period aimed to create a peaceful and stable strategic landscape conducive to long-term economic growth and development. The key word "diversification" implied the expansion of cooperation beyond socialist countries and engagement with all partners regardless of differences in ideology and political systems. Diversification opened opportunities for Vietnam to participate more substantively in the international division of labor and to build up the institutions of a socialist-oriented market economy.

Vietnamese diplomacy has focused on deepening relations with key partners and promoting Vietnam's proactive engagement in a wide range of multilateral mechanisms, particularly with ASEAN-led institutions and the United Nations. While prioritizing bilateral and multilateral cooperation, Vietnamese policymakers perceived minilateralism as a format designed specifically to promote collaboration among a selective group of countries to achieve long-term goals. From the Vietnamese perspective, minilateral arrangements are not merely a complimentary channel to bilateral and multilateral relationships but a layer of mechanisms for implementing foreign policy and contributing to the evolving regional architecture. Vietnam is a member of several minilateral mechanisms, most of which carry out their activities in the Mekong sub-region.

Regarding trilateralism, Vietnam views this format of cooperation within its overarching foreign policy framework. The success of trilateral cooperation involving Vietnam depends on the country's ability to identify and pursue shared interests with its partners while maintaining its strategic autonomy and commitment to multilateralism. Vietnam needs to ensure that its trilateral cooperation does not undermine existing multilateral frameworks, including ASEAN. In reality, Vietnam continues to actively contribute to ASEAN and work closely with ASEAN's Dialogue Partners. The establishment of trilateral mechanisms will require thorough research and a feasible roadmap beforehand. Joining a minilateral mechanism, Vietnam also try to strike a balance between the benefits of cooperation with specific partners and the need to maintain an inclusive, rules-based regional order.

The most important trilateral mechanism that Vietnam joined is the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam (CLV) arrangement. In comparison with the trilateral arrangements mentioned in the previous section, CLV cooperation is not led by any major power and is driven by the interests of the three developing countries in continental Southeast Asia. Vietnam's view on the strength of CLV cooperation is the ability to make decisions independently from external intervention by major powers. Geographical proximity and a shared interest in ensuring peace and stability in the immediate neighborhood and wider region lay a solid foundation for CLV cooperation. The need to tackle pressing transnational issues, such as human trafficking, narcotics crime, and smuggling, and strengthen solidarity between the three nations is imperative for both the member states and regional security.

At the same time, the main weakness of CLV cooperation are limited resources and technology, which has become even more visible as a rising China has tried to increase its influence in the Mekong sub-region. The sheer size of China's markets and investments often overwhelm the projects conducted by

Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. In order to overcome this weakness, the three countries expanded their dialogue mechanisms to all levels, including meetings between the Prime Ministers, National Assembly Chairmen, and most importantly, the Party leaders. Additionally, the scope of CLV cooperation has become more comprehensive over the years and expanded from security to development and digital economy.

CLV cooperation is a typical example of Vietnam's engagement in trilateral cooperation to advance its national interests and generate a favorable strategic environment in the region. This case also proves that independence, self-reliance, and strategic autonomy are fundamental and long-standing interests of Vietnam. These principles also explain why Vietnam proactively promoted trilateral cooperation with Cambodia and Laos despite limited resources. CLV cooperation highlights Vietnam's approach to trilateralism, which prioritizes comprehensive and practical collaboration to strengthen all members' state capacity and autonomy. In this sense, Vietnam constructed a trilateral mechanism based on its desired objective, which helped Vietnam avoid depending on any major power or participating in any alliance.

CLV cooperation is significant in maintaining a conducive strategic environment for Vietnam, but it cannot meet Vietnam's development demands. Almost 40 years after the inception of the Renovation Policy, the 13th Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party charted the National Socio-Economic Development Strategy for 2025-2030, which aims to achieve the status of an upper middle-income economy by 2030 and a developed country by 2045. The long-term vision of Vietnamese leaders is to transform its labor-intensive, resource-consuming assembling and manufacturing industries into a knowledge-based and sustainable economy. In order to fulfill these ambitious goals, Vietnam needs enormous resources that can facilitate the "three breakthroughs" in enhancing the quality of human resources, institutional capacity, and infrastructure. In this context, Vietnam has proactively taken steps to deepen its relationships with developed countries, particularly partners who can share best practices and cutting-edge technologies. From December 2022 to March 2024, Vietnam managed to upgrade its relations with four developed countries to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP), namely the ROK, the United States, Japan, and Australia. The elevation of ties between Vietnam and these advanced economies not only lays a solid foundation for strengthening bilateral cooperation but also creates a favorable context for Vietnam and its partners to go beyond bilateral mechanisms and explore new trilateral frameworks.

Vietnam-US-ROK Framework

Historical Background on Vietnam-US and Vietnam-ROK Relations

Vietnam's relationship with the ROK and the United States are often referred to as a reconciliation between former enemies. However, the historical roots of the two relationships started a long time before the Vietnam War. The history of Vietnam-Korea relations can be traced back to the 13th century when Prince Ly Long Tuong fled Vietnam to escape domestic turmoil and arrived in Hwasan in Hwanghae Province.⁹ Having adopted the Korean name of Lee Yong-sang, Prince Ly Long Tuong founded the Hwasan Lee clan in Korea and later helped the Korean King defeat aggression by the Mongol Empire. The story of the Vietnamese prince's contribution to the defense of Korea's territory explains the deep sympathy between the two nations. In 2018, the number of Ly Long Tuong's descendants in South Korea was estimated to be about 2,700 people.¹⁰ Many of them conduct regular visits to Vietnam to learn more about their roots and to pay respect to their ancestors.

Regarding the relationship between Vietnam and the United States, according to some Vietnamese writers, several exchanges took place between the Nguyen Dynasty and US counterparts from 1833 to 1873, though they did not lead to the establishment of diplomatic ties.¹¹ Historians often note that informal cooperation started during World War II when US officers of the Office of Strategic Services arrived in Vietnam and received shelter from Ho Chi Minh, the leader of the communist Viet Minh movement. Led by Major Archimedes Patti, US officers helped train the Viet Minh to fight against Japanese militarism for Vietnam's independence. Nevertheless, the first letter from Ho Chi Minh to the US president and the Allied countries was sent along with the "Demand of the Annam People" to the Paris Peace Conference at the end of World War I in 1919.¹² Years later, following the end of World War II and just six months after the August Revolution, President Ho Chi Minh sent a telegram to the US president in February 1946, calling for US support for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

The war in Vietnam seriously disrupted Vietnam's relations with the United States and its allies, including the ROK. All sides endured wounds and loss, part of which is still unhealed today. Meanwhile the United States and its allies that participated in the Vietnam war, have made some efforts to address the war legacies, considering it a way to recover mutual trust between the parties. This was an important factor leading to the breakthroughs in Vietnam's relations with the United States and ROK in the 1990s. These efforts helped reaffirm friendship and cooperation as fundamental values of Vietnam's relations with the ROK and the United States, which helped revitalize the relationships after a turbulent history.

Vietnam's Renovation policy was one of the key prerequisites for the establishment of Vietnam-ROK diplomatic relations in 1992 and the normalization of Vietnam-US relations in 1995. Since the beginning of the Renovation period, Vietnam has been keen to learn about and adopt technology and best practices from more advanced economies in pursuit of its economic modernization. South Korea's period of economic growth, the so-called "Miracle on the Han River," inspired Vietnam to embark on its own success story as a war-torn country. The Vietnam-ROK relationship is one of Vietnam's fastest-growing and most comprehensive partnerships. Within 30 years of the establishment of diplomatic ties, the two sides managed to elevate bilateral relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2022. Bilateral trade increased 174 times from \$500 million in 1992 to \$87 billion in 2022.¹³ Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the ROK remained Vietnam's largest foreign investor, third largest trade partner, and second largest partner in terms of ODA, labor, and tourism over the last five years. By March 2024, the accumulated investment by South Korean companies in Vietnam reached about \$90 billion.¹⁴ In 2022 and 2023, Vietnam surpassed Japan to become the ROK's third largest trade partner, although bilateral trade in 2023 decreased 9.1 percent year-on-year.¹⁵ Vietnam and the ROK also have an intensive people-to-people connectivity, with more than 60,000 Vietnamese-Korean families and two diasporas of about 250,000 Vietnamese and Korean people, respectively, living in each country.

Vietnam-US relations have been on a positive trajectory since the normalization of relations in 1995, formally reaching the level of a CSP in 2023. For many years, the United States has been Vietnam's biggest export market and second largest trade partner. In 2022, Vietnam-US bilateral trade set a record at \$123 billion, before decreasing by 11 percent year-on-year in 2023.¹⁶ The United States ranked 11th among Vietnam's foreign investors with an accumulated amount of \$11.7 billion.¹⁷ Although the United States is not one of Vietnam's top ten biggest foreign investors, US companies present advantages in terms of innovative, sustainable, and efficient projects under world-class brands such as Apple, Google, and Intel, among others. In terms of education, Vietnam is among the top five countries of origin for higher-education international students in the United States, with about 21,900 Vietnamese students studying at US institutions from 2022 to 2023. Fulbright University Vietnam, founded in 2016, is a model for university partnerships between Vietnam and external partners. Cooperation in addressing the legacies of the Vietnam War constitutes another aspect of Vietnam-US relations. Vietnam and the United States continue to work closely in searching for the remains of military personnel missing in action, demining, and remediating the repercussions of

Agent Orange.¹⁸ Comprehensive cooperation in a wide range of areas, particularly in addressing the legacies of the war, has laid the foundation for deepening trust and understanding between the two nations.

Relevance of a Vietnam-US-ROK Framework

Given Vietnam's development goals for the period of 2025 to 2030 and its 2045 vision, a trilateral mechanism between Vietnam, the United States, and South Korea is relevant and necessary for all sides. In comparison with existing trilateral mechanisms, a Vietnam-US-ROK framework has its own strength and uniqueness, which help overcome the abovementioned weaknesses, particularly in resource constraints. First, this framework allows the members to combine the human and natural resources of a dynamic developing country with the advanced technology and investment of two developed economies. Vietnam has a young and keen-to-learn workforce, while South Korean companies have well-established factories and infrastructure in Vietnam. Since the upgrading of bilateral Vietnam-US ties to a CSP, a new wave of US investments in Vietnam can provide the necessary funding for practical projects between the three countries.

Second, by focusing on development issues, Vietnam-US-ROK cooperation can serve as a mechanism for tackling emerging challenges from pandemics to the outbreak of conflicts in various regions. Practical cooperation between the three countries can help address disruptions in supply chains, optimize investment flows, and improve the quality of their workforces. In the long term, Vietnam-US-ROK cooperation can promote innovation and sustainable development in the region by implementing projects that address climate change, including energy transition and innovative agriculture. Trilateral projects in these areas will benefit not only the three members but also the broader Southeast Asian economy, given that minilateral cooperation in specific fields with concrete deliverables has become a common trend in the region.¹⁹

Third, trilateral cooperation can generate synergy between the two CSPs that Vietnam established with the ROK and the United States. The convergence of interests between the three countries can be seen clearly in the areas of cooperation stated in the 2023 Vietnam-US Joint Leaders' Statement, which also elevated Vietnam-US relations to a CSP, and the Vietnam-ROK Joint Declaration on CSP.²⁰ Both documents articulate several similar priorities of cooperation, particularly science and technology, digital innovation, and climate change, which suggests the potential areas for future cooperation between the three countries.

Potential Areas for Vietnam-US-ROK cooperation

Semiconductor Industry

Becoming one of the largest semiconductor producers in the world is a priority in Vietnam's development strategy. The policy aims to facilitate a breakthrough in Vietnam's modernization by improving its position in the global value chain and transforming its growth model into an innovative and sustainable economy. The development of Vietnam's semiconductor industry can be accelerated by utilizing the country's abundant supply of 22 million tons of rare earth minerals and the rising workforce of 52.4 million people.²¹ The Vietnamese government has proactively taken measures to attract investment flows to its semiconductor industry by creating a conducive environment for foreign companies. According to Vietnam's tax laws, foreign companies investing in semiconductor projects are exempt from corporate income taxes for the first four years, accept a reduction of 50 percent in taxes for the following nine years, and are granted a preferential tax rate of 10 percent for 15 years.²² Additionally, Vietnam's Ministry of Planning and Investment provides favorable conditions for foreign investors working with its National Innovation Center to promote the start-up ecosystem and the research and development (R&D) of semiconductor production.

In comparison with other investors, US and ROK companies have a clear advantage in strengthening their footprint in Vietnam's semiconductor industry. By entering the Vietnamese market over a decade ago, Intel and Samsung were the earliest foreign players in Vietnam's semiconductor sector. The upgrade of Vietnam's bilateral ties with the United States and the ROK gave a new impetus to cooperation in this area. Both Intel and Samsung committed to further expanding the scope of cooperation to include designing and advanced packaging in Vietnam's semiconductor industry.²³ Intel has its largest global assembly, testing, and packaging (ATP) facility in southern Vietnam, while Samsung plans to invest about \$2.6 billion in its facility in northern Vietnam. During US President Joe Biden's visit to Vietnam in September 2023, the two sides agreed to construct two training centers for building capacity in the semiconductor industry. From September to November 2023, US-based Synopsys signed three Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) with Vietnam's Ministry of Information and Communication, the National Innovation Center, and the People's Committee of Da Nang City to establish a semiconductor research institute, to build a new semiconductor design incubation center, and to help connect engineers trained at Da Nang Incubation Center with job opportunities in domestic and foreign companies.²⁴ Meanwhile, the Vietnam-Korea Institute for Science and Technology (VKIST) organized a number of training courses and opened a new laboratory on semiconductor production, with the next phase of bilateral projects to begin in 2026.²⁵

Experts have made positive assessments of the prospect of Vietnam's semiconductor industry, which is expected to grow between \$20 and 30 billion in value by 2030. Between February 2022 and February 2023, Vietnam's chip exports to the United States reached \$562.5 million, making Vietnam the third largest chip supplier to the United States. According to the official statistics, Vietnam had the fastest growth rate among chip providers in the US market, with a 75 percent year-on-year increase.²⁶ Optimistic forecasts have given the Vietnamese government more confidence to step up the realization of mid-term goals in the semiconductor area. A network of national semiconductor R&D centers was launched in Hanoi, Da Nang, and Ho Chi Minh City and is expected to be fully operational by 2025.²⁷ In terms of human resources, the Vietnamese government has set a target of 50,000 designers, 200,000 engineers, and around 500,000 workers to train for the semiconductor industry by 2030. The objective for 2040 is to ensure Vietnam's ability to fulfill all stages within the semiconductor supply chain, including design, fabrication, and ATP.²⁸

Besides the abovementioned opportunities, Vietnam needs to overcome a number of challenges to realize the full potential of its semiconductor industry. First, the shortage of high-quality workers specializing in this area is the main hindrance to Vietnam's semiconductor industry. For the time being, Vietnam has around 5000 to 6000 engineers and about 500 students graduating every year, which does not meet the demand for human resources in this field.²⁹ Second, despite the well-established factories of tech giants such as Intel, Amkor, and Samsung, Vietnam still lacks fabrication facilities. Domestic companies such as Viettel High Tech and FPT Semiconductor only design chips, outsourcing fabrication to South Korea and testing and packaging to Taiwan.³⁰ Fabrication is the most investment-consuming stage, so it is a challenge for Vietnam to become a full-fledged semiconductor producer. Third, Vietnam still needs to master the technology to refine rare earth minerals. So far, Vietnamese scientists can achieve up to 70 percent of redefined rare earth ores in laboratories, but the ratio of pilot-scale refinement in the mines is much lower.³¹ Fourth, there might be difficulties in ensuring a stable supply of electricity to semiconductor factories.

The Vietnamese government is acutely aware of the opportunities and challenges facing the country's semiconductor industry. Apart from the favorable policies for domestic and foreign investors working in this field, Vietnamese leaders attach great importance to developing high-quality human resources for the semiconductor industry. On April 24, 2024, the Vietnamese government held a meeting to discuss the development of human resources for the semiconductor industry with related ministries and representatives from the business community. Developing human resources is defined by

Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh as the breakthrough for all other breakthroughs.³² In order to seize the opportunities within the semiconductor industry, Vietnam needs to accelerate the training process by reducing the length of training courses to one year instead of two years and intensifying the program. It is also vital to develop human resources capable of working in all stages of the semiconductor supply chain, particularly fabrication. In a broader view, top leaders envision Vietnam as a global hub for the semiconductor workforce and a manufacturing base for advanced electronic products.

Given the opportunities and challenges facing Vietnam's semiconductor industry, trilateral cooperation between Vietnam, the ROK, and the United States should be encouraged in the following areas:

- Strengthen the semiconductor industry ecosystem with synergy between the government, enterprises, and training and research institutions. A network of laboratories supported by US and ROK partners will be instrumental for Vietnam to train experts on the R&D of semiconductor products.
- Focus on education projects to ensure the quantity and quality of the workforce. Apart from existing projects between Vietnamese institutions and US and ROK partners, trilateral cooperation should be promoted in curriculum development, best-practice sharing, and internships in laboratories and factories.
- Accelerate investments in fabrication facilities imperative for Vietnam to build a complete supply chain. In March 2024, the Dutch company VDL ETG reached an agreement with Singapore's Frasers Property to construct a new factory for semiconductor manufacturing in northeastern Vietnam, even though VDL already had facilities in Singapore and Suzhou, China. Therefore, US and ROK companies should utilize existing facilities in Vietnam and expand the scope of operation to include fabrication. Trilateral cooperation can help combine facilities with different functions and reach an agreement on the division of labor among different producers. By doing so, Vietnamese labor can fulfill all stages of semiconductor manufacturing, which helps optimize resources and ensures the resilience of supply chains.
- Establish channels for frequent dialogues between government institutions, think tanks, and enterprises to work out solutions for emerging issues and difficulties.

Artificial Intelligence

Alongside the semiconductor industry, artificial intelligence (AI) is another promising area in which Vietnam can transform its model of economic growth. Experts highlight Vietnam's young population, dynamic start-up ecosystem, and supportive government as key drivers for AI development in Vietnam. Most of Vietnam's biggest corporations, including Viettel, FPT, Vietnam Posts and Telecommunications (VNPT), and VinGroup, actively conduct R&D of AI applications. For two consecutive years, Vietnam improved its rank significantly in Oxford Insights' Government AI Readiness Index, moving from 55th in 2022 to 39th in 2023.³³ In March 2021, the Vietnamese government issued its National Strategy on Research, Development, and Application of AI. According to the National Strategy, Vietnam is envisioned to be one of the four AI-leading countries in ASEAN and a top 50 nation in the world in the research, development, and application of AI by 2030. The Vietnamese government also has a plan to set up ten renowned AI centers in the region and three national centers for big data storage and high-performance computing.³⁴ The AI market in Vietnam is projected to reach \$753.4 million in 2024 and is estimated to grow at an annual rate of 28.63 percent. As a result, Vietnam's AI market is expected to reach \$3.412 billion by 2030.³⁵

South Korean companies were among the first foreign partners to work with Vietnam on AI. As early as 2021, Naver started to collaborate with VNPT on the investment, development, and training of AI and joined hands with Hanoi University of Science and Technology in launching Vietnam's first AI research center. After the upgrading of bilateral ties, Vietnamese organizations proactively pursued cooperation with US and ROK partners on AI at the local level to implement the National Strategy and the CSP. In October 2023, the Vietnam-Korea AI Hub (VKAI) was established in Da Nang City to collaborate with a wide range of leading Korean organizations in the AI field. The scope of cooperation included connectivity within the global AI ecosystem, public healthcare, and innovation.³⁶ Meanwhile, US tech giants have demonstrated increasing eagerness to invest in Vietnam's AI market, although they joined the game later than their Korean counterparts. The Vietnamese global technology company FPT Group is one of the pioneers in promoting large-scale AI cooperation with US partners. In October 2023, FPT Group and Landing AI became strategic partners to collaborate in AI solutions for a wide range of areas, including automobile, manufacturing, healthcare, and education. In April 2024, FPT reached a major deal with US-based NVIDIA on the construction of a \$200-million AI factory to provide cloud GPU services.³⁷ During the same week, the AI Connect II Asia Regional Workshop was held in Ho Chi Minh City

by the US Department of State and the Atlantic Council, signifying another step in promoting joint efforts between the United States, Vietnam, and other regional countries to encourage responsible AI development.

Based on common interests and existing joint projects in AI technology, Vietnam, the ROK, and the United States should explore the following opportunities for trilateral cooperation:

- A comprehensive approach to cooperating in digital technology. Cooperation in AI should be aligned with the semiconductor industry, particularly regarding workforce training and the development of AI chips. The three countries should encourage experts and practitioners to share their knowledge and initiatives in joint research and training projects.
- Trilateral cooperation in developing AI applications for services such as healthcare, banking, education, and tourism. The VKAI-Da Nang model of cooperation should be expanded to other provinces and cities with the participation of US partners and Vietnamese start-up companies.
- Trilateral projects on the development of AI solutions for social issues, including assistance to the elderly and disabled people, education for remote provinces, platforms for smart-city networks, traffic management, smart homes, and other urban issues.
- Joint cultural projects using AI technology in art performances, museums, exhibitions, and cinematography.
- Dialogues between policymakers, experts, businesses, and local community members to work out mechanisms for database connectivity, data safety, and sovereignty.

Non-traditional Security

As mentioned above, one of the key priorities of Vietnam's Renovation diplomacy is to create a peaceful and stable strategic environment for long-term development. Vietnam has pursued such development goals in a manner that interconnects with national security. Having adopted a comprehensive approach to security, Vietnam took measures to proactively address a wide range of threats, attaching great importance to non-traditional challenges. Based on common interests between Vietnam, the United States, and South Korea and the scope of cooperation defined by each of the bilateral CSPs, trilateral cooperation in non-traditional security should be promoted in several potential areas.

Climate Change

As one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change, Vietnam has taken steps toward the goal of achieving net-zero emissions by 2050, outlined during the 2021 UN Climate Change Conference (COP26). Vietnam's strategic documents in this area emphasize the need to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions and adapt local communities to climate change and energy transitions.³⁸ In December 2022, Vietnam joined the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) with the International Partners Group (IPG), which includes the United States, to unlock green financial resources in this area. The Vietnamese government announced a timeline to develop a carbon-credit market, which will operate with a pilot phase starting in 2025 and be fully functional by 2028. In May 2023, Vietnam's Electricity Development Plan 8 (EDP8) outlined targets for increasing the proportion of renewable energy in the national energy structure, reaching 30-39 percent by 2030 and 67.5-71.5 percent by 2050.

According to the Plan of Action for implementing the Vietnam-ROK CSP, approved by both presidents in May 2023, the ROK will allocate non-refundable aid for Vietnam from 2024 to 2027. The fund, estimated to be about \$200 million, aims to support projects facilitating the two countries' adaptation to climate change, environment preservation, and healthcare. In June 2023, the ROK's SK E&S and Vietnam's T&T Group launched a project on energy transition from coal to LNG electricity. The most recent agreement was reached in April 2024 between the T&T Group, Hanwha Energy Corporation, the Korea Gas Corporation (KOGAS), and Korea Southern Power (KOSPO) to accelerate the Hai Lang LNG project.³⁹

The United States has also expressed a strong commitment to support Vietnam's efforts in ensuring multi-sector adaptation to climate change in the Mekong and Red River Deltas, as well as mobilizing financial resources for JETP. The commitment was reaffirmed in a number of high-level meetings between Vietnamese and US leaders. Vietnam Electricity Corporation (EVN) has worked closely with General Electric (GE) and the US Trade and Development Agency (USTDA) to promote low-emission and renewable energy in Vietnam. GE played an important role in increasing the capacity of Vietnam's national grid and provided the high-efficient 9HA gas turbine for Vietnam's first LNG electric plants.⁴⁰

These existing bilateral projects show a common interest in transitioning toward lower-emissions and renewable energy. Meanwhile, technology and financial resources are imperative for a successful implementation of the EDP8.

Therefore, trilateral projects in sharing technologies for a smart national grid and energy storage will help address the main obstacles to developing the renewable sector in Vietnam. Climate cooperation between the three countries should also go beyond the energy sector and explore other directions, for instance:

- Joint research and application of hydrogen, wave-energy, and carbon-capture technology.
- Sharing best practices on developing the carbon-credit market.⁴¹
- Building climate resilience and adaptation capacity for the local communities in the Mekong and Red River Deltas.

Maritime Security

For several decades, maritime security has become one of the most pressing issues in the Indo-Pacific region. While unresolved territorial disputes continue to be the main reason for tension, non-traditional maritime security challenges have become increasingly complex and require adequate efforts to resolve. The bilateral partnerships that Vietnam has pursued with the ROK and the United States in maritime security show similarities in the scope of projects, focused on port visits, ship transfers, and capacity building for law enforcement agencies.⁴² Vietnam also took part in several mechanisms between ASEAN and the United States, mainly related to capacity-building courses for coast guards, maritime law enforcement agencies in the Gulf of Thailand, and multinational vessel boarding officers.⁴³

Addressing non-traditional security issues is imperative for ensuring the freedom and safety of navigation and overflight in the region. Although Vietnam has joined Southeast Asian countries in a number of minilateral and multilateral mechanisms, a lack of resources and expertise remains the main weakness of these frameworks. Collaborating with external partners like the United States and the ROK can provide ASEAN countries, including Vietnam, with the skills, experience, and equipment necessary for tackling a wide range of challenges. Taking into consideration the impact of maritime issues on Vietnam's security and development, the three countries should combine dialogues, training courses, table-top exercises, and information sharing in the following directions.

- Capacity building for maritime domain awareness.
- Early warning for natural disasters, disaster relief, and search and rescue.

- Combatting transnational crimes at sea, particularly piracy and human trafficking.
- Scientific research in marine environment and biodiversity preservation to expand trilateral cooperation in sustainable development.
- Consultations for the maintenance and safety of submarine cables in both trilateral and multilateral formats.

Conclusion

The elevation of Vietnam's ties with the ROK and the United States to CSPs not only gave new momentum for bilateral cooperation but also opened up opportunities for trilateral frameworks. The SWOT analysis identified the strengths of Vietnam-US-ROK cooperation as mobilizing resources and expertise for implementing the CSPs. By focusing on development cooperation based on converging interests between the three countries, trilateral projects can generate a synergy between the two CSPs and tap the full potential of all parties. Combining Vietnam's dynamic developing economy with the US and ROK's cutting-edge technologies and business best practices, Vietnam-US-ROK cooperation will help find solutions for emerging issues such as disruptions in supply chains and demand for a high-quality workforce. Therefore, this is a solution-oriented mechanism between stakeholders from the three countries rather than a trilateral grouping led by the United States and its ally.

Digital transformation and green growth are two pillars of Vietnam's policies to accomplish its major development goals by 2030 and its vision toward 2045. These two pillars are expected to be the key drivers for Renovation 2.0 (Đổi Mới 2.0), which can ensure a better position for Vietnam in the global value chain and more proactive contributions to the international community in addressing global challenges. Given time and resource constraints, the Vietnamese government stepped up its engagement with relevant stakeholders and explored new formats of cooperation to promote the two pillars in a timely and innovative manner. In line with the two CSPs, cooperation in the semiconductor industry, artificial intelligence and non-traditional security should be top priorities for Vietnam, the ROK, and the United States. Practical trilateral projects that deliver concrete results will not only bring benefits to the three member-countries but will also help sustain Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific region as an epicenter for growth and innovation.

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