

2025 EMERGING LEADERS WORKING PAPER

Trilateralism Through Transition: Reflections on U.S.-South Korea-Japan Cooperation From Experts and Emerging Leaders

Two years after the Camp David summit among the United States, South Korea, and Japan institutionalized trilateral cooperation, the partnership faces new challenges amid leadership transitions in all three capitals. To assess the stakes, the Korea Economic Institute of America (KEI) and The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation convened a public panel with Zack Cooper (CSIS), Shihoko Goto (Mansfield Foundation), and Eun A Jo (William & Mary). Drawing on insights from these experts, 15 competitively selected emerging leaders joined a private roundtable to develop blue-sky ideas for the future of trilateral cooperation. This report offers timely perspectives for the policy community on how the three partners can sustain momentum amidst uncertainty.

Since the Camp David summit, trilateral cooperation has advanced across security, economic, and diplomatic fronts, even as new challenges test its resilience. Joint defense coordination and regular exercises have strengthened deterrence vis-à-vis North Korea's missile and nuclear threats, in addition to reinforcing alignment in response to other regional security challenges. Economic cooperation has also deepened. Japan and South Korea are diversifying their access to critical minerals through different but complementary strategies, while both are expanding investments in the United States. At the same time, the United States' tariff-focused and bilateral approach to trade has complicated longer-term trilateral alignment. Meanwhile, the institutional mechanisms launched at Camp David, supported by highly engaged ambassadors in Seoul and Tokyo, have helped sustain momentum. Public sentiment is shifting on both sides. In Japan, favorable views of South Korea have nearly doubled over the past decade, with a majority of respondents indicating "friendly feelings" toward their neighbor, especially among the younger generation. In South Korea, for the first time in three decades, a majority views relations with Japan positively. However, political uncertainty in all three capitals continues to threaten the durability of these gains.

The Donald Trump, Lee Jae Myung, and Takaichi Sanae administrations face strikingly similar pressures that shape the trajectory of trilateral cooperation. All three leaders are navigating challenging domestic politics, limiting maneuverability for bold foreign policy moves. Much of the follow-through on the Camp David commitments occurred under past leaders who negotiated the accord. Thus, the true test of trilateral institutionalization lies ahead and hinges on whether these mechanisms can continue to function with equal regularity and purpose under shifting political leadership. The three governments also share a common focus on how to engage with China, seeking to balance risk management and economic competition with the reality of interdependence. Finally, the United States, South Korea, and Japan are advancing an agenda of economic security, from critical minerals and supply chains to technology and investment, though Trump's preference for bilateral deals risks undercutting trilateral alignment.

These dynamics raise a central question: What does trilateralism look like moving forward? If it is to remain more than a symbol, what are the opportunities for impact, and where are the risks of backsliding most acute?

To address these questions, participants engaged in three in-depth sessions that explored areas of opportunity, structural and cultural challenges, and concrete strategies for institutional and grassroots collaboration. This off-the-record workshop built upon the public panel held in August and focused on how the trilateral partnership could remain resilient and relevant amid shifting political dynamics, evolving public sentiment, and regional uncertainties.

KEY DISCUSSION THEMES

Where can trilateral cooperation truly make a difference, and what risks emerge when that cooperation is absent?

The political moment has changed substantially since the Camp David summit, with all three countries experiencing a change in leadership. This context underscored a sense of both urgency and opportunity. Participants explored the idea that trilateral cooperation must move beyond high-level diplomacy by emphasizing practical, people-focused partnerships.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPACT

Participants identified North Korea and China as continued threats to regional stability, making trilateral defense coordination, including joint exercises and intelligence sharing, essential. Yet, some cautioned that diverging strategic cultures and threat perceptions may challenge deeper alignment.

Cooperation on emerging technologies such as AI, space, quantum computing, semiconductors, biotechnology, and critical supply chains (including e-recycling and urban mining) emerged as promising avenues. Participants called for strategic coordination on industrial policies, regulatory alignment, and trusted supplier frameworks to avoid fragmentation and increase collective resilience.

Trilateralism was framed as a tool to advance global public goods such as pandemic preparedness, climate adaptation, and humanitarian aid, especially when traditional, bilateral alliance mechanisms fall short.

Participants strongly endorsed investing in youth-focused programs, language training, arts diplomacy, and trilateral city or university partnerships. These people-to-people initiatives were seen as critical to reshaping public opinion and expanding the cultural foundation of trilateralism.

RISKS

Participants offered a wide-ranging and nuanced view of the risks confronting trilateral cooperation, shaped by political, societal, institutional, and geopolitical factors.

A recurring theme was the erosion of public trust and identity-based resistance. Participants discussed how nationalism, historical grievances, and low public awareness limit the space for deeper cooperation. Misinformation and political polarization—amplified by social media and exploited by external actors—were also cited as growing threats to trilateral solidarity.

Structural disparities among the three countries also emerged as a barrier. Differences in economic scale, industrial capacity, and perceived equity in burden-sharing have led to mutual suspicion, particularly in sectors tied to national security and supply chain resiliency. Participants stressed that these imbalances are not insurmountable but must be addressed transparently and proactively.

Finally, external pressures such as evolving regional competition, strategic uncertainty in the Indo-Pacific, and broader global instability were framed as both a challenge and a call to action. Participants warned that failure to coordinate trilaterally could invite greater interference, dilute shared leverage, and weaken each country's ability to respond to transnational threats.

ACTION

Strategic Insights & Recommendations

Institutionalizing trilateral cooperation beyond summit-level diplomacy. Proposed ideas included permanent subcommittees, inter-parliamentary exchanges, and cross-sector commissions on energy, trade, or education.

Several emphasized the importance of bottom-up engagement. Civil society, business communities, local governments, and young professionals should be empowered to lead trilateral initiatives.

Measure the success of people-to-people exchanges or cultural diplomacy. Ideas included structured follow-up, impact surveys, and standard operating procedures for trilateral collaboration.

Public messaging must be recalibrated. Rather than focusing solely on strategic threats, policymakers should also highlight the tangible, shared benefits of trilateral cooperation in areas like education, health, and culture.

CONCLUSION

While participants acknowledged the limits of immediate policy impact, the workshop reinforced the idea that sustainable trilateralism must be both top-down and bottom-up. By investing in emerging leaders, exploring unconventional issue areas, and building grassroots support, the United States, South Korea, and Japan can create a more resilient and inclusive trilateral future.

This report was prepared by the Mansfield Foundation and KEI staff. We have attempted to accurately present the key findings from the workshop and capture the consensus of the group. This report may or may not reflect the views of any individual member of the group. The views expressed herein should not be attributed to any individual participant or the organizations with which they are affiliated. All members of the workshop attended in their personal capacity. The workshop, held on September 9, 2025, was conducted off-the-record to ensure an open and supportive environment.

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2025 Emerging Leaders

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