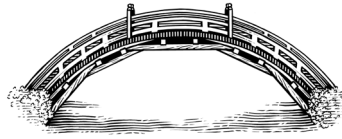


ROUNDTABLE

Pathways for U.S.-ROK-Japan Cooperation:  
Strengthening Trilateral Ties amid Uncertainty



*Kuyoun Chung*

*Eunmi Choi*

*So Jeong Kim*

*Darcie Draudt-Véjares*

*Ellen Kim*

*Yukie Sato*

*Shin-ae Lee*

*Jahyun Chun*

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## U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateral Cooperation: Past, Present, and Future

*Kuyoun Chung*

As Donald Trump's second presidency begins in January 2025, the entire world is attuned to what changes to U.S. foreign policy might be wrought under his slogan "Make America Great Again." This concern stems from the "America first" approach to foreign policy from his first term as president in 2017–21. Key aspects of this foreign policy included a transactional approach to alliances, a rejection of multilateralism, anti-intellectualism, attempts to decouple the United States and China, and populist-driven anti-immigration policies. During his 2024 presidential campaign, President Trump emphasized strengthening the U.S. manufacturing base through a trade war with China, ending so-called forever wars, and protecting national borders.<sup>1</sup> His stance reflected a populist economic nationalism that capitalized on domestic economic scarcity. In foreign policy, he adopted a geoeconomic perspective, promoting a foreign policy based on reciprocity and retrenchment in the Middle East and Europe to focus on competition with China.

The issue lies in the fact that, as Trump fixates on these geoeconomic interests, U.S. allies are worried about the future of the regional security architecture. This is due to the tension between the Trump administration's goal of gaining an advantage in U.S.-China competition, its retrenchment foreign policy orientation, and its transactional approach to alliances. Specifically, the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) and Japan are concerned about the administration's potential impact on trilateral cooperation between the United States, South Korea, and Japan, which is a key component of the security latticework the Biden administration built. Since their first trilateral summit at the 1994 APEC meeting in Jakarta, cooperation between these three countries has often fluctuated. However, the Camp David Declaration agreed on by the three governments in 2023 marked the highest level of cooperation to date. This concord was made

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Navarro, *The True Meaning of Trump's MAGA: Lessons from the 2022 Republican Red Wave That Never Happened* (New York: Bombardier Books, 2023); and Robert C. O'Brien, "The Return of Peace Through Strength: Making the Case for Trump's Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, June 18, 2024.

possible by the shared strategic interests of the three countries in jointly addressing the North Korean nuclear threat, as well as by South Korea's foreign policy vision, which aims to position the country as a global pivotal state and engage more actively with the Indo-Pacific region. In fact, the rapidly changing regional balance of power in the Indo-Pacific; the strengthening of alignments among revisionist states such as China, North Korea, Russia, and Iran; and the need for a unified response to these developments have further solidified the value of trilateral cooperation.

In this context, this essay reviews the achievements of U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral cooperation to date and examines the conditions under which momentum for such cooperation might be sustained during the second Trump administration, setting the stage for this *Asia Policy* roundtable. This collection of essays by experts from the three states aims to contribute to the effort of cooperation between South Korea, the United States, and Japan by suggesting both new and traditional areas where trilateral cooperation could bolster the regional environment for economic development and resilient security. Through the efforts of all three partners, it is expected that trilateral cooperation can endure in the Trump 2.0 era.

### *Trilateral Cooperation in the Past*

Trilateral cooperation between South Korea, the United States, and Japan began as a platform for addressing the North Korean nuclear issue, with the joint operation of the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group in 1999. However, this initiative faced challenges, as the strategic interests of the three countries regarding the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue did not align precisely. Despite the advancement of North Korea's nuclear capabilities and the increasing frequency of its provocations, little progress was made in formulating trilateral responses.

In particular, in the early 2000s, South Korea focused on improving relations with China, hoping that Beijing would play a constructive role in addressing the North Korean nuclear issue.<sup>2</sup> In 2013, under President Park Geun-hye, South Korea proposed the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative, emphasizing a parallel strategy of improving both ROK-China and ROK-U.S. relations, rather than expanding ROK-U.S.-Japan cooperation. In a period when U.S.-China competition was beginning to intensify, Park's regional strategy caused South Korea to lose leverage over

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<sup>2</sup> Gilbert Rozman, Sue Mi Terry, and Eun A. Jo, *South Korea's Wild Ride: The Big Shifts in Foreign Policy from 2013 to 2022* (London: Routledge, 2023), 16–19.

the United States, while at the same time Japan's strategic relations with the United States were strengthening. The Abe administration in Japan aligned with the Obama administration's rebalancing policy and participated in the U.S.-led Trans-Pacific Partnership, while also enhancing Japan's security contributions, including the revision of security legislation to permit collective self-defense and a prominent role within the U.S.-Japan alliance. Nevertheless, President Park maintained a critical stance toward Japan on the controversial historical issues between the two countries and rejected a summit with Japan. Although an agreement was reached in 2015 on the issue of "comfort women," it faced backlash from the South Korean public. As a result, ROK-U.S.-Japan cooperation struggled to regain momentum.

The subsequent administration of President Moon Jae-in in South Korea declared that it would not accept the 2015 agreement, further cooling ROK-Japan relations. In 2018, several events occurred that deepened the emotional confrontations and distrust between the two countries and brought ties to a new low: the dissolution of the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation, the South Korean Supreme Court's ruling on forced labor during World War II, Japan's provocative low-altitude flights by Maritime Self-Defense Force aircraft near ROK naval ships, radar lock-on incidents by the ROK Navy, and disputes over listing Japan's Hashima Island as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

In short, the deterioration of ROK-Japan relations, combined with the rise of U.S.-China competition, caused ROK-U.S.-Japan cooperation to suffer. ROK-Japan relations were even described as the "weak link" in the trilateral cooperation.<sup>3</sup> However, the reluctance of the United States to become entangled in the disputes between its two allies made the U.S. rebalancing strategy and subsequent effort to revitalize trilateral cooperation less tenable.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the justification for trilateral cooperation on the North Korean nuclear issue weakened from South Korea's perspective, as the belief emerged that the lever for engaging North Korea in dialogue on denuclearization lay not in strengthening trilateral cooperation but rather in improving ROK-China relations. These factors ultimately led to a situation where the strategic value of ROK-U.S.-Japan cooperation became difficult to enhance.

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<sup>3</sup> Wooseon Choi, "New Horizons in Korea-U.S.-Japan Trilateral Cooperation," Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 27, 2024 ~ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/new-horizons-korea-us-japan-trilateral-cooperation>.

<sup>4</sup> Kiichi Fujiwara, "Rebalancing and Entanglement: America's Dilemma in East Asia," in *Asia's Alliance Triangle: U.S.-Japan-South Korea Relations at a Tumultuous Time*, ed. Gilbert Rozman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

### *Current Progress*

Although ROK-U.S.-Japan cooperation was initiated in the 1990s to address the North Korean nuclear issue, the formation of the trilateral relationship in fact predates this challenge. It is composed of the U.S.-ROK alliance and the U.S.-Japan alliance. South Korea and Japan are not bound by any formal alliance, but this virtual alliance<sup>5</sup> between them can be traced back to the existence of the Korean Clause in the 1960 revision of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, the U.S.-Japan Status of Forces Agreement related to the stationing of UN Command (UNC) forces in 1954, and the fact that Japan has hosted the UNC-Rear since 1957 in support of potential contingencies on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>6</sup>

As North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities have advanced, the imperative for ROK-U.S.-Japan cooperation has only increased. Recently, efforts to revitalize the UNC have also been initiated by United States Forces Korea, which aligns with the Yoon Suk Yeol administration's intention to strengthen the deterrence architecture toward North Korea. In other words, by not only reinforcing the U.S.-ROK alliance but also building a deterrence architecture that encompasses UNC member states, the South Korean government aims to prepare for both North Korean nuclear and missile threats and potential contingencies on the peninsula, while simultaneously showing a united stance by the international community toward North Korea.

This intention is closely tied to South Korea's first-ever Indo-Pacific strategy and aligns with ROK-U.S.-Japan cooperation as a key component within the broader networked Indo-Pacific security architecture, including multilateral cooperation frameworks such as the Quad, the AUKUS (Australia-UK-U.S.) partnership, the U.S.-Japan-Australia trilateral, and the U.S.-Japan-Philippines trilateral. The presentation of the Indo-Pacific strategy was part of the Yoon administration's foreign policy vision that the country would be a global pivotal state. As such, ROK-Japan rapprochement and the revitalization of ROK-U.S.-Japan cooperation are integral to the implementation of South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy. Furthermore, the strategy coincided with Washington's recognition of ROK-U.S.-Japan cooperation as the indispensable foundation for maintaining both a U.S.-led, rules-based order and a balance of power in East Asia.

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<sup>5</sup> Ralph A. Cossa, "U.S.-ROK-Japan: Why a 'Virtual Alliance' Makes Sense," *Korea Journal of Defense Analysis* 12, no. 1 (2000): 67–86.

<sup>6</sup> Yasuyo Sakata, "Camp David and U.S.-Japan-ROK Trilateral Security and Defense Cooperation: Consolidating the Northeast Asia Anchor in the Indo-Pacific," *Korea Economic Institute*, 2024 *Korea Policy*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2024.

The 2023 Camp David Declaration, agreed on by Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, President Yoon, and President Joe Biden, encompasses broad cooperation on a range of issues from military affairs to economic security, to human exchanges to technological collaboration. Regarding the North Korean nuclear issue, the three governments established a framework for cooperation on integrated deterrence, including real-time missile-warning information sharing and a trilateral dialogue on space security. They agreed on opposing China's efforts to alter the status quo in the Indo-Pacific region and issued a joint message to this effect, including an emphasis on the peaceful resolution of the Taiwan Strait issue, which is considered essential for international security and prosperity. The three leaders pledged to expand cooperation across sectors, including enhanced information sharing in the economic domain and the launch of an early-warning system for supply chains.

The declaration recognized that trilateral cooperation will not reach the deeper level of the bilateral U.S.-ROK or U.S.-Japan alliances and is not a binding security alliance to replace them. Nonetheless, the strategic value of trilateral cooperation has significantly increased as the intersection of the three countries' strategic interests has expanded and been acknowledged. Given the intensification of U.S.-China competition, North Korean provocations, and deepening North Korea ties with China and Russia, the strategic imperative for ROK-U.S.-Japan cooperation is clearly advancing forward.

### *Looking Ahead*

The key factor in making ROK-U.S.-Japan cooperation sustainable is the shared threat perception toward North Korea and China. North Korea has recently proposed a "two-state system" on the peninsula to justify its potential use of nuclear weapons against South Korea. Meanwhile, China is expanding its activities to alter the status quo in the western Pacific, alongside its military buildup. Growing strategic cooperation between China, North Korea, and Russia has further underscored the imperative for ROK-U.S.-Japan cooperation.

However, the strategic value of cooperation between the three states depends on whether it becomes institutionalized in the future. In this context, the potential improvement of ROK-Japan relations is critical. The current rapprochement is largely due to a shared focus on common strategic interests, both states' identities as democracies, and a strategic

priority to restore and maintain a rules-based order, rather than being primarily driven by any true resolution of the protracted historical issues between the two countries. Changes in domestic politics could reverse the current momentum. In this context, Yoon's declaration of martial law, subsequent impeachment in December 2024, and resulting domestic political uncertainty are of great importance. Politics in South Korea are highly polarized, and foreign policy is similarly divided, as Yoon's foreign policy perspective is very different from that of the opposing Democratic Party. In particular, there is a stark contrast in their views on ROK-Japan relations. Nonetheless, the perception of the relationship with Japan at the elite level of the Democratic Party differs from that of South Korean public. The public is generally supportive of trilateral cooperation between South Korea, the United States, and Japan to deter North Korean provocations, and it also distinguishes between historical issues and the need for strategic cooperation when it comes to ROK-Japan relations.<sup>7</sup>

Another challenge to the institutionalization of ROK-U.S.-Japan cooperation is the Trump 2.0 era. If the second Trump administration adopts a transactional, bilateral approach to alliances under an America-first stance, as Trump as threatened to do, the durability of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic space could weaken. This could result in the Indo-Pacific strategies adopted by the U.S. allies becoming ineffective, and they might turn to unilateral strategies in an attempt to best secure their own interests, leading to the collapse of the rules-based order. To avoid such a situation, it is imperative that South Korea, Japan, and the United States continue sustaining the momentum of their cooperation and explore new avenues to deepen the three-way partnership. This *Asia Policy* roundtable collects the perspectives of various experts for this purpose and, in doing so, hopes to provide another novel opportunity for trilateral cooperation. ◆

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<sup>7</sup> Sangmi Jeong, "Security Threats and South Koreans' Perception of Japan: Assessing Public Opinion on ROK-Japan Relations and the ROK-U.S.-Japan Security Cooperation," *Korean Journal of International Relations* 63, no. 1 (2023): 177-219.

## How to Consolidate U.S.-ROK-Japan Cooperation under the New Leadership Changes

*Eunmi Choi*

The changes in leadership in the United States and Japan and the policy flux in the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) have highlighted the need for a reassessment of ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral cooperation. Since the Camp David Summit in August 2023, the three countries have engaged in joint efforts to consolidate and institutionalize their cooperation, with the objective of ensuring its unwavering continuity despite changes in leadership. However, much of the trilateral cooperation that has been observed since the summit was made possible by the alignment of the leadership, regional vision, and approach of President Yoon Suk Yeol, President Joe Biden, and Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. In other words, cooperation since the summit has been driven by the three leaders' emphasis on relationships with allies and like-minded countries, the latticework approach to cooperation, and their shared perception of regional stability through trilateral solidarity. The trust of the three leaders served as the lubricant, facilitating the alignment of their respective visions and approaches. This essay examines the role of political leadership and public perceptions in advancing trilateral cooperation and identifies challenges that will need to be overcome.

### *New Challenges of Trilateral Cooperation under Leadership Changes*

As 2025 begins, the re-emergence of the Trump administration in the United States and the inauguration of the Shigeru Ishiba cabinet in Japan, as well as policy disquiet in South Korea after Yoon's brief declaration of martial law and subsequent impeachment, herald new challenges for ROK-U.S.-Japan cooperation. President Donald Trump appears to have a diminished interest in the alliances, values, and contributions to the international community that the Biden administration emphasized, instead seeming to prioritize efficiency, calculation, and practicality. Prime Minister Ishiba made four previous attempts to become the

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leader of the leading Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) before assuming the premiership in October 2024 and winning a parliamentary vote in November 2024 to remain the country's leader. As of this writing he has yet to demonstrate a compelling record of achievement in the realm of foreign affairs. Given Ishiba's reputation as a defense and military expert, it has been anticipated that he could implement novel approaches to Japanese diplomacy, potentially including the establishment of an Asian arrangement similar to NATO. Nevertheless, his inexperience in the diplomatic arena demonstrates his limitations in such situations and in presenting his diplomatic agenda. Furthermore, Ishiba's lack of support within the LDP, coupled with the ruling coalition's decisive defeat in the 2024 House of Representatives elections, represents structural limitations that could impede his ability to advance coherent and sustained momentum in governance. In contrast, many anticipate that Trump and the Republican Party will demonstrate robust leadership following their attainment of a "red trifecta" with control of the presidency, the Senate, and the House of Representatives.

Against this backdrop, South Korea hopes to further strengthen the trilateral cooperation system, but it is also deeply troubled. In particular, the ROK and Japan each face not only domestic challenges but also a long-unstable relationship, which is considered the weakest link in the trilateral partnership, despite the March 2023 decision of the Yoon government to improve ties. Tension between South Korea and Japan, resulting from unresolved historical issues such as "comfort women" and forced labor during Japan's occupation of Korea, continues to present a challenge to both bilateral cooperation and ROK-U.S.-Japan cooperation.

The problem is that the current political landscape appears to lack the leadership of heads of state who care deeply about this issue. Prime Minister Kishida demonstrated a unique affinity for fostering amicable relations between South Korea and Japan and dedicated significant efforts to stabilizing these ties. Similarly, Biden played a pivotal role in facilitating cordial relations, leaving a notable void in the diplomatic arena. Despite repeated South Korean attempts to break through the difficulties between the two countries, Japan has remained unresponsive, leading to mounting ROK frustration and distrust. This disappointment has been compounded by Japan's recent failure to fulfill its commitments at the Sado Mine memorial ceremony and the lack of diplomacy around this issue, which exemplifies the continuing impact of historical grievances. The Sado Island mines were listed in 2024 as a UNESCO World Heritage Site after Japan

acknowledged the mines' history of forced labor, including of hundreds of Koreans, during World War II and promised to hold an annual memorial service. While Japan did hold a service, it did not offer an apology for forced Korean labor, and the service was boycotted by ROK officials because of "unspecified disagreements" between both governments."<sup>1</sup> South Korea held its own memorial service the next day. In light of such developments, it is challenging to engage in discussions related to bilateral cooperation between South Korea and Japan and trilateral cooperation between South Korea, the United States, and Japan based on the instability of ROK-Japan cooperation.

### *The Perception Gap between South Korea and Japan: Is It the Weakest Link?*

Despite these difficulties, the ROK and Japan agree on the importance and necessity of bilateral cooperation. According to the results of the "Perceptions of Korea-Japan Relations Survey" conducted by Kangwon National University and Hankook Research in March 2024, positive attitudes toward ROK-Japan cooperation and enhanced security cooperation surpass negative attitudes in both South Korea and Japan.<sup>2</sup> In South Korea, 61.3% of survey respondents expressed a positive view of ROK-Japan bilateral cooperation, and 68.5% of Japanese respondents expressed a favorable view. However, their reasons were different. South Korean respondents placed a greater emphasis on economic cooperation (46.9%), whereas the Japanese responses exhibited a more balanced distribution between economic (27.1%) and security (20.7%) considerations.

Regarding the rationale for security cooperation among the ROK, the United States, and Japan, 57.2% of South Korean respondents and 60.1% of Japanese respondents conveyed a positive opinion of cooperation. Again, however, their reasons differed. South Korean respondents identified the "denuclearization of North Korea and peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula" as the most significant consideration (64.9%), whereas "countering China" received the most responses among Japanese respondents (48.1%). Only 20.5% of South Korean respondents identified "countering China" as a reason for trilateral cooperation.

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<sup>1</sup> Mari Yamaguchi, "Japan Holds Sado Mines Memorial despite South Korean Boycott amid Lingering Historical Tensions," Associated Press, November 24, 2024 ~ <https://apnews.com/article/japan-south-korea-history-forced-labor-sado-unesco-96a2e4952c4d801a3c35ee1b24588e2f>.

<sup>2</sup> See "ROK-Japan Relations Perception Survey Report," Hankook Research, April 2024.

While the survey results suggest broad support for bilateral and trilateral cooperation, they also highlight the tension in the ROK-Japan dynamic. South Korean respondents tended to perceive Japan as an “untrustworthy adversary” (48.1%), whereas Japanese respondents displayed a stronger perception of South Korea as a “cooperative partner working towards the same goal” (42.3%). The poll results suggest that the general public’s perception of ROK-Japan cooperation is relatively weak, even though they believe that cooperation is important and necessary. In such circumstances, it is challenging to anticipate leadership from the individuals now directing the course of ROK-U.S.-Japan cooperation without additional support.

### *What Are the Options for Action and Potential Avenues for Intervention?*

First and foremost, it is imperative to reinforce parliamentary support to the diplomacy of the three leaders. Fortunately, there appears to be popular consensus on the importance of cooperation between South Korea, the United States, and Japan, even if there are differences in the manner and scope of cooperation. The role of democratically elected lawmakers is to represent the interests of their citizens, and these parliamentarians and members of Congress can exert political influence. Strengthening diplomacy and interactions at the parliamentary level between the three states would assist in building trust between the lawmakers and leaders and between the three countries.

Second, the role of experts and opinion leaders who facilitate communication between the government and private sector, as well as between countries, should be emphasized. The scope and influence of foreign policy in any democracy is ultimately constrained by the strength of its domestic public support. It is incumbent upon a democratic government to listen to its people, to fulfill its responsibility to explain and persuade, and to work to fulfill the people’s needs. It is at this juncture that experts and opinion leaders assume a pivotal role. They serve as a crucial bridge between the state and the people, facilitating communication and understanding. Additionally, they possess the ability to comprehend the perspectives of other countries and accurately convey their own. Therefore, it is essential not only to encourage the growth of such thought leaders but also to reinforce strategic dialogues at the Track 1 and Track 2 levels and through people-to-people ties between South Korea, the United States, and Japan.

Third, the scope of cooperation should be expanded and developed within an institutionalized framework, such as the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat announced and established in November 2024.<sup>3</sup> The secretariat is anticipated to facilitate a new phase of trilateral cooperation and go some way toward safeguarding cooperation despite changes in administration. The Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat among the ROK, China, and Japan, which is based in Seoul, serves as an effective model for the ROK-U.S.-Japan secretariat to foster intergovernmental collaboration across multiple sectors and demographic groups. To this end, it is prudent to leverage the ROK-U.S.-Japan mechanism to develop a range of initiatives that can reinforce trilateral cooperation at multiple levels. ◆

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<sup>3</sup> Kim Seung-yeon, "S. Korea, U.S., Japan Launch Secretariat for Trilateral Cooperation," Yonhap, November 20, 2021. ~ <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20241120009800315>.

## Beyond Historical Memory: South Korean Domestic Polarization and U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateral Cooperation

*Darcie Draudt-Véjares*

For years, strategic communities in the United States, South Korea, and Japan have concentrated on historical memory as the primary obstacle to trilateral cooperation. Conventional wisdom suggests that if historical grievances—such as issues around “comfort women,” forced labor, territorial disputes, and colonial history—could be managed or compartmentalized, alignment would naturally follow between these three advanced democracies.

This assumption rests on two foundational pillars: first, the shared democratic values of governance, rule of law, and market economies; and second, aligned strategic interests, including deterring North Korea’s nuclear ambitions, countering China’s assertive regional posture, and securing critical technology supply chains. Yet, beneath these seemingly rational strategic calculations lies a more complex reality.

While the trilateral alignment between these three democracies has made substantial progress in recent years, particularly under the leadership of President Joe Biden, President Yoon Suk Yeol, and Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, domestic polarization in South Korea presents a critical barrier to successful trilateral strategic cooperation among Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul. This essay examines the multiple layers of polarization that shape South Korea’s foreign policy and how these internal struggles complicate efforts to build a unified front on the international stage. Unless these layers of polarization, particularly those relating to foreign policy, can be reconciled, partisan contestation will continue to undermine attempts to forge effective trilateral cooperation.

### *Unprecedented Alignment*

The alignment of Biden, Yoon, and Kishida marked a historic shift toward greater cooperation between the United States, South Korea, and Japan. The 2023 Camp David Summit was a key milestone, yielding tangible commitments in several crucial areas. These included the establishment of

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Freedom Edge, an annual combined trilateral military exercise to improve regional defense readiness; the creation of real-time missile-defense data sharing to address common security threats; and the development of early-warning systems for supply chain vulnerabilities.<sup>1</sup> Joint research and development efforts on critical technologies like semiconductors and artificial intelligence further highlighted the alignment's forward-looking agenda.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, mechanisms for consultation on economic coercion were created to form a unified front against destabilizing global practices.<sup>3</sup>

These accomplishments built on earlier breakthroughs, such as the restoration of the General Security of Military Information Agreement, which revived intelligence sharing between Seoul and Tokyo.<sup>4</sup> The normalization of trade relations further solidified this alignment, providing a strong foundation for continued cooperation amid evolving geopolitical challenges.<sup>5</sup> Together, these steps significantly advanced regional stability and strategic collaboration. Despite these promising developments, however, diplomatic progress masks a complex underlying reality. Trilateral cooperation, while strategically vital, remains precariously balanced on a foundation of domestic political tensions, particularly within South Korea.

### *The Layers of South Korean Polarization*

To grasp the disconnect between these developments and the reality on the ground, it is essential to unpack the multiple layers of polarization that pervade South Korean society regarding trilateral cooperation with

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<sup>1</sup> "Japan-ROK-U.S. Conduct Second Exercise Freedom Edge," U.S. Pacific Fleet, November 13, 2024 ~ <https://www.cpf.navy.mil/newsroom/news/article/3965275/japan-rok-us-conduct-second-exercise-freedom-edge>; "Japan, ROK, and U.S. Conclude Freedom Edge 24-2," U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, November 15, 2024 ~ <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3966576/japan-rok-and-us-conclude-freedom-edge-24-2>; and "Japan, U.S., South Korea to Boost Supply Chains for Industrial," Kyodo News, June 27, 2024 ~ <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2024/06/23a2393ee9e9-update2-japan-us-s-korea-to-boost-supply-chains-for-industrial-minerals.html>.

<sup>2</sup> "Joint Statement by President Biden, Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba of Japan, and President Yoon Suk Yeol of South Korea," American Presidency Project, November 15, 2024 ~ <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/joint-statement-president-biden-prime-minister-shigeru-ishiba-japan-and-president-yoon-suk>.

<sup>3</sup> Yeo Han-koo, "Economic Cooperation by Korea-Japan-China Trilateral Could Ease Tensions," Peterson Institute for International Economics, June 13, 2024 ~ <https://www.piie.com/blogs/realtime-economics/2024/economic-cooperation-korea-japan-china-trilateral-could-ease-tensions>.

<sup>4</sup> Yi Wonju, "S. Korea Fully Restores Bilateral Military Information-Sharing Pact with Japan," Yonhap, March 21, 2023 ~ <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230321004751325>.

<sup>5</sup> Victor Cha and Christopher B. Johnstone, "Japan and South Korea Turn the Page," Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 6, 2023 ~ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/japan-and-south-korea-turn-page>.

the United States and Japan.<sup>6</sup> This polarization spans a wide range of issues, from specific bilateral disputes with neighboring countries like Japan to more fundamental debates about South Korea's national identity and its role in regional and global governance.<sup>7</sup> These divisions go beyond mere policy disagreements, reflecting deeper ideological cleavages that influence how the country's foreign policy is shaped and how it is perceived by the public. Understanding these layers provides critical insight into why certain strategic initiatives meet with resistance, regardless of their potential benefits for regional stability and security.

Besides party preferences on North Korea policy, no issue better illustrates these complex divisions than South Korea's relationship with Japan. According to a 2024 survey by the East Asia Institute (EAI), 57.9% of supporters of the conservative People Power Party (PPP) view Japan favorably, compared with just 28.3% of progressive Democratic Party (DP) supporters.<sup>8</sup> This divide reflects not only historical grievances but also differing views on South Korea's strategic orientation. Recent efforts to normalize relations with Japan, such as Yoon's third-party reimbursement plan for forced labor claims and the restoration of Japan to South Korea's preferential trade list, highlight this tension. Partisan reactions to these moves demonstrate how deeply party allegiance shapes policy responses.<sup>9</sup> For example, 58.6% of PPP supporters backed the solution to the forced labor issue, while only 18.8% of DP supporters did.<sup>10</sup> These polling results suggest a strong correlation between party affiliation and stance on Japan-related initiatives.

A broader strand of foreign policy polarization further complicates South Korea's political landscape. There are significant divides over the direction of South Korea's alliances, particularly with the United States and Japan. While many in the PPP support stronger ties with both

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<sup>6</sup> Cheol Hee Park, "South Korean Views of Japan: A Polarizing Split in Coverage," in *Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies*, ed. Gilbert Rozman (Washington, D.C.: Korea Economic Institute of America, 2020) [~ https://keia.org/publication/south-korean-views-of-japan-a-polarizing-split-in-coverage-2](https://keia.org/publication/south-korean-views-of-japan-a-polarizing-split-in-coverage-2).

<sup>7</sup> Andrew O'Neil, "South Korea as a Middle Power: Global Ambitions and Looming Challenges," in *Middle-Power Korea: Contributions to the Global Agenda*, ed. Scott A. Snyder (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2015), 75–89.

<sup>8</sup> Yul Sohn, "Polarization and South Korea's Japan Policy: Key Takeaways from the 2024 Public Opinion Survey on Korea-Japan Relations," East Asia Institute, EAI Issue Briefing, 2024, 18 [~ https://www.eai.or.kr/new/en/etc/search\\_view.asp?intSeq=22743&board=eng\\_issuebriefing](https://www.eai.or.kr/new/en/etc/search_view.asp?intSeq=22743&board=eng_issuebriefing).

<sup>9</sup> "President Yoon's Solution to Forced Labor Issue Hailed by the U.S., the UN and the European Union," Office of the President (ROK), March 7, 2023 [~ https://eng.president.go.kr/briefing/pQmrsdtm](https://eng.president.go.kr/briefing/pQmrsdtm); and Kim Tong-hyung, "South Korea Restores Japan on Trade 'White List,'" Associated Press [~ https://apnews.com/article/korea-japan-trade-exports-russia-9c3707521e77a3717a664557d90531b4](https://apnews.com/article/korea-japan-trade-exports-russia-9c3707521e77a3717a664557d90531b4).

<sup>10</sup> Sohn, "Polarization and South Korea's Japan Policy," 18.

countries, the DP remains critical of Japan's growing influence, especially on security matters. This divide influences South Korea's positioning in the face of regional threats, such as North Korea's missile program and China's assertiveness. This strand of polarization reflects competing visions of South Korea's global role, shaped by both ideological and historical considerations.

These foreign policy divisions are symptomatic of profound and dynamic political fractures that penetrate South Korean governance. Beyond the issues of Japan and foreign policy, South Korea is experiencing broader political polarization, which affects governance. Tensions surrounding President Yoon's leadership, including his controversial December 2024 attempt to consolidate power, have sparked significant protests and opposition from civil society.<sup>11</sup> As of this writing, despite public outrage, Yoon initially retained backing from the PPP, which demonstrated the party's alignment with his vision of world order, if not a referendum on governance priorities. While Yoon's subsequent impeachment by the National Assembly (including twelve members of his own party) demonstrated some erosion of PPP support, deep divisions persist within the party, as evidenced by the resignation of party leader Han Dong-hoon. The Constitutional Court now faces the unprecedented task of reviewing presidential impeachment with only six justices, while a parallel criminal investigation on insurrection proceeds. This institutional uncertainty, combined with deepening polarization, makes it more difficult to address both domestic challenges and international relations, entrenching divisions within South Korean politics at a time when regional security cooperation is increasingly vital.

### *Structural Challenges to Sustainable Cooperation*

The focus on historical grievances between South Korea and Japan often overshadows three fundamental structural issues that complicate the path forward. These challenges, deeply embedded in South Korea's political and social landscape, shape both the public's perception of foreign policy initiatives and the effectiveness with which these initiatives can be implemented. Addressing these structural challenges is essential for understanding the persistent barriers to lasting cooperation.

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<sup>11</sup> Darcie Draudt-Véjares, "How South Korea's Democracy Saved Itself," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Emissary, December 11, 2024 ~> <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2024/12/south-korea-democracy-yoon-protests?lang=en>.



Among the most consequential is the generational transformation reshaping South Korea's strategic worldview. There is a generational divide over national interests, with younger South Koreans tending to have a more favorable view of Japan than older generations. The EAI survey reveals that approval of Japan is notably higher among those in their 20s and 30s (46.4% and 46.3%, respectively) than among those in their 40s and 50s (32.3% and 38.7%).<sup>12</sup> This difference shows a shift in historical perspective, but it is not merely a reflection of varying historical memories; rather, it is also a sign of changing priorities and frameworks for understanding security and prosperity. Younger South Koreans are navigating an era of multipolar competition, where alliances are less about reconciling the past and more about managing strategic economic and security imperatives. This generational shift challenges a more conventional approach to foreign policy, which often assumes that historical reconciliation is a prerequisite for cooperation.


South Korea's vibrant civil society also plays a crucial role in shaping foreign policy, ensuring that any strategic initiative undergoes intense public scrutiny. The EAI survey underscores this point, revealing that 42.1% of South Koreans believe that resolving historical issues must come before any deeper cooperation with Japan and the United States. In contrast, only 32.4% believe that cooperation itself can pave the way for reconciliation.<sup>13</sup> This divide highlights a broader challenge: public legitimacy is essential for the success of any trilateral initiative. Without broad public support, even well-intentioned agreements risk collapse, as seen in past failures such as the 2015 comfort women agreement.<sup>14</sup> Scrutiny from civil society ensures that policymakers cannot overlook the importance of public perception when pursuing strategic alignment.

Beyond the visible tensions of public perception lies a more subtle challenge: the disconnect between bureaucratic achievements and public awareness. The productive institutionalization of trilateral cooperation in multiple domains over the past several years is vulnerable to an "invisibility paradox," which refers to the fact that bureaucratic achievements often

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<sup>12</sup> Sohn, "Polarization and South Korea's Japan Policy," 15.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>14</sup> Critics of the 2015 agreement point to several challenges in its implementation: concerns were raised about subsequent statements from Japanese officials that appeared to contradict the agreement's spirit, while some comfort women survivors expressed reservations about the terms, choosing instead to pursue separate legal action. See Yuji Hosaka, "Why Did the 2015 Japan-Korea 'Comfort Women' Agreement Fall Apart?" *Diplomat*, November 18, 2021  <https://thediplomat.com/2021/11/why-did-the-2015-japan-korea-comfort-women-agreement-fall-apart>.

remain hidden from the public eye. While trilateral working-level cooperation in areas such as supply chain resilience and cybersecurity has made notable progress, these technical governance initiatives and their real-world benefits frequently go unnoticed or underappreciated by the broader public. As a result, political entrepreneurs can exploit this invisibility, framing cooperation negatively or even undermining it entirely, despite technical successes being achieved behind the scenes. This paradox highlights the disconnect between the practical achievements of trilateral cooperation and limited public awareness or understanding of these advancements. In this context, technical progress alone is insufficient; sustained public engagement and transparency are needed to secure broad support for trilateral initiatives.

### *Implications for Regional Order*

These challenges are not confined to South Korea. Japan is also facing political challenges, and the unpopularity of Shigeru Ishiba might create hurdles for working with South Korea.<sup>15</sup> Following Donald Trump's re-election to a second term, the U.S. course ahead on issues such as alliance management, industrial policy, and competition with China remains uncertain. These domestic dynamics create additional complexity for sustaining trilateral cooperation.

Success in building sustainable trilateral cooperation could demonstrate how mature democracies navigate internal divisions while maintaining strategic coherence. Conversely, failure would validate the skeptics who argue that democratic systems cannot deliver consistent foreign policy amid domestic polarization. To maintain trilateral cooperation, policymakers must go beyond the assumption that bureaucratic ties can bypass political volatility. They must engage directly with South Korea's complex democratic landscape and understand how different generations and political factions view economic sovereignty, alliance obligations, and democratic values. This requires reconceptualizing trilateral cooperation as an engagement with South Korea's domestic complexities rather than a simple alignment of government interests. ◆

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<sup>15</sup> Kana Baba, "How South Korea's Chaos Could Lead to Frayed Japan Ties," *Nikkei Asia*, December 9, 2024 ~ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/How-South-Korea-s-chaos-could-lead-to-frayed-Japan-ties>.

## Beyond Security: Human Rights as the Foundation of Japan-ROK Cooperation

*Yukie Sato*

Around the time of the 2024 U.S. presidential election, researchers and politicians in various countries, including Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea), expressed concerns about potential shifts in U.S. foreign policy following a possible change in administration. Naturally, for Japan and the ROK, the fate of the recently initiated trilateral cooperation between them and the United States was a particular subject of concern.

On August 18, 2023, the leaders of these three countries convened at Camp David and committed to enhanced trilateral cooperation. While the leaders emphasized that the three countries “will strengthen our coordination on promoting democracy and protecting human rights,” their primary focus was on security and economic matters.<sup>1</sup> This focus was reaffirmed in the joint statement they released on the anniversary of the summit in August 2024.<sup>2</sup>

While security and economic cooperation might fluctuate with changes in administrations or international circumstances, human rights, as “universal values” or “a common standard of achievements of all peoples and all nations” (adopted by the United Nations in the form of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948), must be upheld regardless of a nation’s government and political system.<sup>3</sup> This raises the question: How can human rights be respected in a sustainable manner? This essay explores this question, with a particular focus on Japan-ROK relations, and proposes a new approach to human rights diplomacy.

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<sup>1</sup> “The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States,” White House, August 18, 2023 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/the-spirit-of-camp-david-joint-statement-of-japan-the-republic-of-korea-and-the-united-states>.

<sup>2</sup> “Joint Leaders’ Statement on the Anniversary of the Trilateral Leaders’ Summit at Camp David,” White House, August 17, 2024 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/08/17/joint-leaders-statement-on-the-anniversary-of-the-trilateral-leaders-summit-at-camp-david>.

<sup>3</sup> “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” United Nations ~ <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

*Traditional Human Rights Diplomacy and the Security Dilemma*

The prototype of modern human rights diplomacy emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s in the U.S. Congress through public hearings on human rights violations in various countries and the cutting of U.S. aid to nations where such violations occurred.<sup>4</sup> When Jimmy Carter became the U.S. president in 1977, he officially incorporated this approach into U.S. foreign policy. This approach aimed to improve human rights conditions in countries with ongoing abuses by applying pressure, such as withholding economic or military assistance.

While this form of diplomacy can be effective when the target countries are neither allies nor of much strategic or security importance to the United States, it has two major limitations. The first limitation, as highlighted by early criticism of Carter's "double standard" regarding human rights diplomacy,<sup>5</sup> lies in the approach's limited effectiveness when human rights violations occur in allied or strategically important countries. A notable example in East Asia was the Carter administration's response to serious human rights abuses in the ROK in May 1980. At the time, Carter tolerated these actions, stating, "the maintenance of a nation's security from Communist subversion or aggression is a prerequisite to the honoring of human rights and the establishment of democratic processes."<sup>6</sup> While this stance may have seemed unavoidable for the administration given the geopolitical threats of the era, it ironically undermined the core principle of human rights diplomacy by prioritizing security over human rights. The second limitation is that traditional human rights diplomacy often overlooks human rights violations within the very countries advocating for these principles.

This traditional framework of human rights diplomacy has carried over into today's foreign policy without significant changes in the United States and in other countries. However, this approach relegates human rights to a secondary priority when weighed against broader national security matters. To break free from this contradiction, this essay proposes addressing shared

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<sup>4</sup> Barbara Keys, "Congress, Kissinger, and the Origins of Human Rights Diplomacy," *Diplomatic History* 34, no. 5 (2010): 823–51.

<sup>5</sup> Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships and Double Standards," *Commentary*, November 1979 ~ <https://www.commentary.org/articles/jeane-kirkpatrick/dictatorships-double-standards>.

<sup>6</sup> "For the Record," International Communication Agency, U.S. Embassy Seoul, June 18, 1980; and "Hanguk gungnaejeongsee daehan Miguk baneung, 1980. jeon 6 gwon v.1 Miguk jeongbuui baneung, 5–12 wol" [U.S. Reaction toward Korean Internal Situation, 1980. 6 Volumes. V.1 U.S. Government's Reaction, May–December], Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Republic of Korea), Registration Number 14014, Diplomatic Archives, Flame Number 21–27.

societal issues—rather than security concerns—through the lens of human rights. This approach is particularly applicable to Japan-ROK relations, fostering not only the protection of human rights but also more amicable bilateral relations.

### *Bilateral Relations among the Trilateral Partners*

Among the three pairs of bilateral relations within the U.S.-Japan-ROK triangle, Japan-ROK relations face the greatest challenges. While U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK relations have historically experienced difficulties, they are now relatively stable. In contrast, Japan-ROK relations have frequently faced tensions since diplomatic normalization in 1965. This instability is rooted in Japan's history as a former imperial power and the ROK's experience as its former colony.

Conflicts between the two countries arising from this historical background have evolved from disputes over historical recognition to broader diplomatic and social issues regarding the acknowledgment and redress of past human rights violations. Both nations have made efforts to overcome these conflicts. For instance, in 2015 the two governments reached a “final and irreversible” agreement on the “comfort women” issue (although the agreement did not fully resolve the dispute).<sup>7</sup> More recently, in May 2023, Japanese prime minister Fumio Kishida and ROK president Yoon Suk Yeol jointly visited the Cenotaph for the Korean Victims of the Atomic Bombing in Hiroshima that acknowledges that many Koreans were in Hiroshima due to Japanese imperial rule at the time of the atomic bombing and were also among its victims. However, despite such efforts, relations remain unstable, as evidenced by persistent negative sentiments and gestures in the ROK toward Japan.

### *The Potential of Sharing Human Rights Values*

To bridge these differences in Japan and the ROK, it is essential to develop a shared understanding of what constitutes human rights, what human rights issues entail, and how these rights can be protected or redressed at various levels. Two reasons underscore why this is necessary. First, disseminating the concept of human rights broadly among policymakers and citizens in both countries can help bridge the gap between

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<sup>7</sup> “Japan-ROK Foreign Ministers’ Meeting,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), December 28, 2015  
~ [https://www.mofa.go.jp/a\\_o/na/kr/page4e\\_000365.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kr/page4e_000365.html).

official discourse and public sentiment. Second, a shared understanding of human rights concepts enables meaningful dialogue based on common assumptions about past human rights violations and how they can be addressed. One effective approach is to expand the scope of shared values by collaboratively addressing everyday social issues.

Japan and the ROK face a range of common social challenges, such as declining birthrates, aging populations, income inequality, rural depopulation, and gender inequality. Such issues are intrinsically linked to human rights, particularly the rights to life and equality that are guaranteed not only in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights but also in the constitutions of both Japan and the ROK in the same way. In other words, they share similar constitutional provisions on rights to life and equality, or human rights, and common challenges that are deeply related to these rights. This presents a significant opportunity for Japan and the ROK to collaborate by sharing insights on how contemporary social challenges constitute human rights issues and how to address them as part of both states' interests in and commitment to protecting human rights. Through such efforts, the two countries could develop a shared understanding of the core concept of human rights. Furthermore, ultimately this shared understanding would enable historical issues to be discussed through the lens of human rights. In essence, the smaller the gap in our shared understanding of human rights values, the smaller the gap in our recognition of the past.


### *Conclusion*

Historically, governments have often subordinated human rights to considerations of security. Relegating human rights—which are purportedly universal values—to security concerns that fluctuate with changes in administration undermines their universality. To solidify these values, it is essential to reinforce them at multiple levels of society.

One effective approach is to tackle common, everyday challenges through a shared—even if partial—human rights framework. For Japan and the ROK, this approach could facilitate reinterpretation of historical issues based on a shared human rights perspective. The stronger the shared commitment to universal human rights, the narrower the perceptual gap toward the past between the two countries will become.

Reinforcing shared values may not seem to yield immediate diplomatic results. However, in the long term, it could be profoundly significant in three ways. First, it would contribute to the enhanced stability of trilateral

cooperation, bolstering this weakest link of the U.S.-Japan-ROK triangle. Second, even if shifts in security dynamics render trilateral cooperation among the United States, Japan, and the ROK unnecessary or untenable, this reinforcement of shared human rights values will still help strengthen and maintain relations between Japan and the ROK. Third, developing deeper ties based on such shared values contributes to the protection and redress of human rights not only in Japan and the ROK but also in countries that have friendly relations with them, even amid security concerns.

True reconciliation between Japan and the ROK can be achieved when they sustain strong relations, even in the absence of common external challenges. To achieve reconciliation, protect human rights domestically and globally, and prevent future human rights violations, it is important for Japan and the ROK to collaborate on mutual social issues based on the shared value of human rights. 

## Navigating Uncertainty: Risk Management in U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateral Cooperation

*Jahyun Chun*

The Biden administration underscored the importance of trilateral cooperation among the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea), the United States, and Japan to address the North Korean nuclear issue and ensure regional stability. The Camp David Summit in August 2023 emphasized this cooperation, resulting in a joint statement and marking a pivotal stand-alone meeting of the three nations. For the United States, which champions a “free and open” Indo-Pacific, South Korea and Japan are indispensable military allies. Efforts among the three states to bolster trilateral ties have extended to the economic and technological domains, culminating in the opening of the Trilateral Secretariat office in Seoul in November 2024.

Institutionalizing and regularizing trilateral cooperation has been a persistent challenge, however, with the goal of maintaining a stable framework despite leadership changes in each country. While establishing the secretariat was a significant step, the regularization of summit meetings remains unresolved, leaving the trajectory of trilateral cooperation under new administrations uncertain.<sup>1</sup> Even though attempting to predict the future is unscientific, it is essential to prepare for predictable results based on past experiences. This essay explores risk management strategies to safeguard trilateral cooperation, focusing on two critical areas: ROK-Japan relations and North Korea’s threats.

### *Risk Management in ROK-Japan Relations*

The relationship between South Korea and Japan has been tumultuous due to long-standing historical issues, but in recent years the bilateral relationship has not been significantly weighted within the framework of

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<sup>1</sup> About a year and three months after the Camp David Summit, in November 2024, a trilateral meeting of the leaders of South Korea, the United States, and Japan was held during the APEC summit in Peru, but it is difficult to view this as a sign of regularization.



trilateral cooperation. Tensions, persist, however. Even if we limit ourselves to examining the year 2024, Japan claimed to possess sovereignty over the disputed Dokdo Island (known as Takeshima in Japanese, the island is de facto controlled by South Korea) in its diplomatic and defense white papers. Additionally, Japanese middle school history textbooks containing distorted accounts of Korean history, such as downplaying or omitting the issue of “comfort women” and references to the coerciveness of forced labor, passed the curriculum approval process.<sup>2</sup>

The scars of the past do not remain in the past; they continue to act as security and economic threats in the present, becoming factors that can strain ROK-Japan relations at any time. The historical conflicts stemming from Japan’s colonization of Korea from 1910 to 1945, including the issues of comfort women and forced labor, dominate the realms of diplomacy, judiciary, and politics in both countries in relation to each other and currently manifest in ongoing developments. It is not merely a matter of history, but a question of universal human rights, a diplomatic issue between the two nations, a judicial issue for South Korea, and a political issue for Japan.<sup>3</sup> Until such issues are prioritized and addressed between the two countries, the institutionalization of military cooperation that the United States ultimately envisions will remain a distant prospect. In particular, if the momentum for trilateral cooperation weakens or if leaders with anti-Japanese or anti-Korean sentiments emerge in either country, the risks arising from the bilateral relationship could be significant, necessitating a mechanism to manage them.

### *Risk Management of North Korea’s Threats*

Since the 1990s, North Korea’s nuclear threats have continued in increasingly sophisticated forms, and cyber threats, such as hacking, driven by advancements in technology, are also emerging as immediate dangers. Recently, North Korea has undertaken so-called gray-zone provocations,

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<sup>2</sup> Only one out of fourteen textbooks addressed the coercive nature of the mobilization of “Japanese military comfort women,” and some textbooks either described forced mobilization as legitimate or outright denied it, labeling it, for example, as a “baseless issue.” Other contentious issues were also not depicted in a balanced way. For example, Sang-Goo Nam, head of the Research Center of Northeast Asia Historical Foundation, stated, “Fifteen of the 18 Japanese social studies textbooks that passed the assessment described Dokdo as ‘illegally occupied’ by South Korea, while the number of textbooks that said Dokdo was Japan’s ‘inherent territory’ increased compared to the 2020 assessment.” Yena Kim, “A Recurring Japanese Textbook Problem...Historical Bias Makes It Difficult to Trust Japan and Korea,” Yonhap (in Korean), March 23, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Jahyun Chun. “Changes in the South Korea-U.S.-Japan Trilateral Cooperation: A Focus on the National Trauma and Institutionalization of Cooperation,” *East-West Studies* 33, no. 2 (2021): 199.

such as balloon launches and GPS jamming, and its new defense treaty with Russia and deployment of troops to the war in Ukraine have also emerged as a serious concern for the international community. In this regard, South Korea and the United States are making efforts to strengthen cooperation on extended deterrence, centered on their Nuclear Consultative Group and the Extended Deterrence Strategy Consultative Group, while also expanding security cooperation to include Japan. Additionally, under South Korea's leadership, a new international monitoring mechanism, the Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team, has been established to continue efforts to carry out effective sanctions against North Korea.<sup>4</sup>

However, it is also necessary to consider the possibility that the second Trump administration will resume bilateral summits and direct negotiations between the United States and North Korea, as occurred in his first term. Given Donald Trump's preference for bilateralism over multilateralism, there is a high possibility that cooperation among South Korea, the United States, and Japan could take place outside the trilateral framework. And while South Korea might play a mediating or facilitating role, there is also a significant chance that it could be sidelined in bilateral negotiations between the United States and North Korea. It certainly would be a positive development to bring North Korea into the international community and help the country adapt to international norms and rules, which is what many in South Korea desire to see done. However, negotiation behaviors that appear exceptionally dependent on a specific U.S. leader or administration are unlikely to bring about the most sustainable and predictable options. Negotiations with North Korea under the Trump administration that are not based on a framework of cooperation among South Korea, the United States, and Japan, or that exclude South Korea's priorities, are not an appropriate way to address the increasing threats from North Korea.

### *Conclusion*

Trilateral cooperation among South Korea, the United States, and Japan is essential for addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by North Korea

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<sup>4</sup> This new mechanism for North Korean sanctions replaces the expert panel under the UN Security Council's North Korea sanctions committee, which was disbanded due to Russia's veto, and includes eleven countries: Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States. "Joint Statement on Establishing Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team for Implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions Regarding the DPRK," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), October 16, 2024 ~ [https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/pressite\\_000001\\_00652.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/pressite_000001_00652.html).

and for ensuring regional stability in the Indo-Pacific. The regularization and institutionalization of trilateral cooperation are necessary to prevent the relationship from being affected by internal and external factors or from suddenly deteriorating. While the establishment of the Trilateral Secretariat in Seoul marks a significant step toward institutionalizing this cooperation, the relationship between South Korea and Japan remains a critical factor that could hinder progress if unresolved historical grievances resurface. Demonstrating the need for such three-way cooperation, North Korea's evolving threats and increasing aggression require robust and coordinated responses among the three nations. To navigate these complexities, the three states must develop effective risk management strategies, focusing on both the historical tensions between South Korea and Japan and the immediate security challenges posed by North Korea. By prioritizing dialogue, fostering mutual understanding, and reinforcing collaborative defense measures, the trilateral partnership can better adapt to changing political landscapes and enhance regional security. ◆

## U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateral Engagement on Economic Security: Disentangling Resilience, Competitiveness, and Protection

*Kristi Govella*

**D**ue to developments such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the rise of economic coercion, and the war in Ukraine, economic security has become an intense focus of policy discussions around the world. The United States, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) have each elevated economic security to be a top policy priority. Domestically, all three countries have developed new policy tools to mitigate and respond to threats over the past several years, and they have also engaged trilaterally to collectively bolster their economic security.

This essay assesses the progress of domestic and trilateral economic security initiatives among the United States, Japan, and South Korea and considers their future prospects. Although there are promising policy commonalities, there is no consensus about the definition of economic security among the three countries. Instead, their governments are pursuing distinct combinations of three overlapping aims in their economic security policies: resilience (i.e., reducing risks from disruption or interference), competitiveness (i.e., promoting domestic economic capabilities), and protection (i.e., restricting or disadvantaging foreign competition).<sup>1</sup> The future of trilateral economic security engagement will depend on how policymakers choose to balance these goals as they adapt, implement, and target their economic security policy tools in light of evolving national interests.

### *Domestic Economic Security Initiatives*

The governments of Japan, South Korea, and the United States have announced and implemented a host of domestic economic security initiatives in recent years. An analysis of these initiatives demonstrates that there is no shared definition of economic security among the three partners.

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<sup>1</sup> This argument has been developed from ideas published in Kristi Govella, “Seeking Resilience and Revitalization: U.S. Supply Chain Strategy in the Indo-Pacific,” Italian Institute for International Political Studies, March 17, 2022 ≈ <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/seeking-resilience-and-revitalization-us-supply-chain-strategy-indo-pacific-34181>. Competitiveness and protection were previously discussed as intertwined parts of the goal of revitalization.

In some areas, there appears to be significant policy overlap. For example, all three governments have strengthened their screen of inbound investment through the Foreign Investment Risk Review Modernization Act (the United States), the Foreign Exchange and Foreign Trade Act (Japan), and the National Advanced Strategic Industries Act (South Korea). They have all promoted the semiconductor industry in the form of the CHIPS and Science Act (the United States), the K-CHIPS Act (South Korea), and other subsidies (Japan and South Korea). The three governments have also pursued similar clean energy subsidies through the Inflation Reduction Act (the United States), the Green Transformation Act (Japan), and the Korean New Deal. In addition, they have implemented other industrial policies and initiatives intended to bolster supply chain resilience.

However, there is also notable policy diversity among the three countries. Japan is the only one that has enacted comprehensive legislation in the form of its 2022 Economic Security Promotion Act; no parallel legislation currently exists in the United States or South Korea. The United States has made use of strategic tariffs through Section 232 and Section 301 in the name of economic security, while Japan and South Korea have avoided this approach thus far. The United States has gone the furthest in pursuing advanced technology export controls; Japan has placed export controls on semiconductor manufacturing equipment in solidarity with the United States, while South Korea has not. Strengthened oversight for outbound investment is included in South Korea's Act on Protection of Industrial Technology, and the U.S. Outbound Investment Security Program went into effect in January 2025; Japan has not made similar moves in this direction.

The diversity in domestic policies reveals that each of the countries is pursuing a different combination of resilience, competitiveness, and protection in its economic security policy. There are strong shared concerns about reducing risk by bolstering supply chain resilience. There are also clear shared impulses toward revitalizing domestic industry through industrial policy, which combines the aims of both competitiveness and protection. This often involves providing resources to give domestic firms a boost vis-à-vis their foreign competitors—primarily those from China, though not exclusively. However, the extent to which governments are willing to explicitly protect their industries by restricting economic activity or imposing negative penalties for undesirable behavior varies, with Japan and South Korea generally being less willing to take these actions than the United States.

Even in cases where policies appear similar—as inbound investment screening or subsidies—these similarities may be deceptive. Industrial policies designed to promote national competitiveness are currently framed as compatible with trilateral cooperation—for example, through “ally-shoring” or “friendshoring”—because they are aimed at reducing dependence on China in the short term. However, since these policies are designed to enhance national competitiveness, they may in fact result in increased competition among U.S., Japanese, and Korean firms in the medium to long term. It remains to be seen whether the three governments are willing to try to harmonize their respective industrial policies. Moreover, much depends on how domestic regulations are implemented. The decision by the Biden administration to block the acquisition of U.S. Steel by Japan-based Nippon Steel on weak national security grounds suggests that protection was the main aim and demonstrates that policy tools such as investment-screening rules can be turned against allies as well as against geopolitical rivals. Although Japan and South Korea are allies of the United States, they are also still its economic competitors—this is a persistent tension in economic security cooperation.

### *Trilateral Economic Security Engagement*

After South Korean president Yoon Suk Yeol took office in May 2022, steps were quickly taken to re-establish U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral cooperation after a long period of tension between Tokyo and Seoul. The first trilateral leaders’ summit in over four years was held in June 2022 in Madrid, and a second summit was held in November 2022 in Phnom Penh. Economic security was part of these discussions from the earliest stages, with an emphasis on resilience and competitiveness. In their Phnom Penh joint statement, President Yoon, Japanese prime minister Fumio Kishida, and U.S. president Joseph Biden emphasized “the importance of trilateral cooperation to strengthen the rules-based economic order to enhance economic security and prosperity throughout the Indo-Pacific and the world” and launched a three-way economic security dialogue.<sup>2</sup>

At the subsequent August 2023 Camp David Summit, the three leaders set forth an ambitious trilateral agenda. Economic security initiatives included a supply chain early-warning system pilot, a disruptive technology

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<sup>2</sup> “Phnom Penh Statement on U.S.–Japan–Republic of Korea Trilateral Partnership for the Indo-Pacific,” White House, November 13, 2022 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/11/13/phnom-penh-statement-on-trilateral-partnership-for-the-indo-pacific>.

protection network, cooperation on standards, and collaboration among national laboratories. The Trilateral Economic Security Dialogue had convened four times by July 2024, bringing together officials from the U.S. National Security Council and their Japanese and South Korean counterparts. These meetings sought to deepen engagement and promote shared trilateral interests on issues such as critical and emerging technologies (e.g., quantum and space), supply chain resilience (e.g., semiconductors, batteries, and critical minerals), the Data Free Flow with Trust concept, and responses to economic coercion.

By July 2024, the three sides had implemented the supply chain early-warning system for priority products and materials and established mechanisms for rapid information sharing on disruptions. They also agreed to identify joint research projects in emerging technologies and strengthen coordination on technology protection and infrastructure security. Economic security has also been incorporated in other trilateral meetings over the past two years. For example, the June 2024 joint commerce and industry ministerial meeting addressed export controls, private-sector partnerships, international standards development, critical and emerging technologies, and critical minerals.

In sum, the three governments have taken important steps toward restoring dialogue and establishing cooperative mechanisms with an emphasis on mutual resilience and competitiveness. However, while this progress is significant, it is still in a nascent stage and may be derailed by changing circumstances that tilt national priorities toward protection and that redefine competitiveness to include rivalry with allies. Aware of this danger, the three governments have taken measures to quickly institutionalize their cooperation, including the establishment of a trilateral coordinating secretariat. These trilateral mechanisms could help mitigate tensions from the differing prioritization of resilience, competitiveness, and protection in the three countries' future economic security policies.

### *Future Prospects*

Domestic and trilateral economic security policies have evolved among the United States, Japan, and South Korea at an impressive pace. The question now is how matters will develop amid shifting domestic and external conditions. Japan's Liberal Democratic Party-led coalition lost its majority in the October 2024 Lower House election. Although the broad direction of Japanese policy is unlikely to change, the government may have

less capacity for trilateral cooperation as it focuses on domestic concerns. Donald Trump won the November 2024 U.S. presidential election, fueling expectations of an increasingly nationalist economic policy that could include broad-based tariffs and increased scrutiny of foreign investment. In South Korea the legislature initiated impeachment proceedings against Yoon in December 2024 after his short-lived attempt to declare martial law. If Yoon resigns or is removed by the Constitutional Court, his successor might be less willing to pursue trilateral initiatives. Moreover, the South Korean government will remain in limbo for months until new leadership takes office.

Although the short-term outlook appears grim, these fluctuations in political leadership will not necessarily lead to the end of trilateral economic security engagement. The shared economic security concerns that brought these countries together will persist in the future. Even if the three governments do not actively cooperate on joint initiatives, they will undoubtedly continue to implement economic security policies within their respective countries; consultation and coordination with one another on these policies has potential benefits. Recent trilateral institutionalization may provide helpful channels for this engagement, if leaders choose to use them, and the three governments will continue to collaborate on economic security issues within broader multilateral initiatives such as the Minerals Security Partnership. Given the breadth of the economic security agenda, trilateral engagement may vary across issue areas moving forward. In some cases, such as establishing shared standards for emerging technologies, cooperation could be less politicized, and it may be easier for policymakers to argue that mutual gains in competitiveness come with minimal national sacrifice. In other cases, more direct trade-offs may be perceived between national competitiveness and working together with allies, and domestic political incentives may push protection to the forefront, as in the case of the U.S. Steel deal. Much will depend on whether the three governments conceptualize their respective national interests in the short term versus the long term and the balance of resilience, competitiveness, and protection that they choose to pursue. ◆



## Enhancing U.S.-ROK-Japan Cooperation in Maritime and Economic Security

*Shino Watanabe*

The U.S. election on November 5, 2024, resulted in a surprising landslide victory for President Donald Trump and a Republican trifecta, with the party winning control of the House of Representatives and the Senate until at least the midterm election in November 2026. Trump's victory spurred heated debates over what "Trump 2.0" will look in terms of his economic and foreign policy and its impact on China and the rest of the world.

However, his return to power could provide opportunities for Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) to work closely together. The year 2025 marks the 60th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations between the two countries. The ROK will host APEC in 2025, and the momentum for cooperation between Tokyo and Seoul should continue, at least among working-level officials, although recent developments in ROK politics put this in some doubt. Cementing Japan-ROK relations has become more critical than ever in meeting the increasingly complex challenges in the Indo-Pacific and as a ballast to promote trilateral cooperation with the United States, regardless of the U.S. administration's degree of commitment to it.

### *Achievements of Trilateral Cooperation*

Japan-U.S.-ROK relations have been improving dramatically since the Camp David Summit on August 18, 2023, heralded a new trilateral partnership, and they have maintained good momentum. On November 15, 2024, on the sidelines of the APEC Leaders' Meetings in Peru, Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba, President Joe Biden, and President Yoon Suk Yeol held a trilateral summit. It was the second such summit since August 2023, and one of the important outcomes was the agreement to institutionalize cooperation by establishing the Trilateral Coordinating Secretariat.

As the joint statement issued after the second summit indicated, there has been remarkable progress in trilateral cooperation on a wide range

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of issues in the past fifteen months.<sup>1</sup> A series of dialogues have been held in critical areas, including between finance, commerce, and industrial ministers. The three countries have emphasized measures to strengthen their supply chain resilience by establishing multiple mechanisms, such as the Minerals Security Partnership, the Resilient and Inclusive Supply-Chain Enhancement Partnership, and the Trilateral Economic Security Dialogue. In addition, the Crisis Response Network, established under the Supply Chain Agreement of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) in July 2024, is a realistic venue for further cooperation because the ROK as chair and Japan as vice chair (in two-year terms) can demonstrate their leadership in securing member states' access to vital supplies during emergencies.

### *The Need for More Cooperation on Maritime Transportation*

Along with such enhanced cooperation, there is more room for Japan and the ROK to lead trilateral coordination. As was stipulated in the IPEF Supply Chain Agreement, concluded in November 2023, one key objective is to “cooperate to address logistical bottlenecks and vulnerabilities in the Parties’ supply chains, including those that may arise in the context of land, air, and maritime and waterway transport, warehousing, port-related services, and infrastructure.”<sup>2</sup>

In this light, maritime transportation is a promising area for further cooperation. Japan and the ROK can work closely together in this space to attract the United States’ continuing attention to the value of trilateral cooperation. Japan and the ROK are both highly dependent on foreign trade by sea to obtain critical goods, such as energy resources, food, and other strategic materials. Thus, maritime transportation is a lifeline for their supply chain resilience and economic security. Despite its enormous significance, however, maritime transportation has yet to receive adequate attention in the trilateral cooperation.

Meanwhile, China’s presence in maritime transportation is significantly growing. According to the UN Conference on Trade and Development, in terms of flags of registration by deadweight tons, as of January 1, 2024, Liberia remained the top flag register, accounting for 17.3% of the world fleet. Hong Kong ranked fourth (8.5%), and China ranked sixth (5.7%),

<sup>1</sup> “Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), November 15, 2024 ~ <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100754616.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> “Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity Agreement Relating to Supply Chain Resilience,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan) November 14, 2023, 2 ~ <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100581548.pdf>.

while Japan ranked tenth (1.8%), the ROK, fifteenth (0.9%), and the United States, twenty-second (0.6%).<sup>3</sup>

Regarding fleet ownership, ranked by the number of vessels of 1,000 gross tons or above, China was at the top with 9,418 vessels (16.2% share), Japan was third with 4,104 vessels (7.1%), the United States was eleventh with 1,788 vessels (3.1%), and the ROK was twelfth with 1,688 (2.9%). Because Hong Kong ranked eighth, with 2,000 vessels (3.4%), the number of vessels owned by China and Hong Kong combined reached 11,418, or 19.6%. Japan, the United States, and the ROK together possessed 13.1%, far less than even China alone.<sup>4</sup> In terms of capacity, measured in deadweight tons, China ranked second (13.3%); Japan, third (10.4%); the ROK, sixth (4.2%); and the United States, thirteenth (2.2%).<sup>5</sup> Ownership matters the most, however, because owners can control their fleets and investment decisions.

Moreover, China prefers to register vessels under its national flag. In 2024, 51.8% of all vessels worldwide were registered under a foreign flag. However, China was predominantly nationally flagged, with 6,600 out of 9,418 vessels (70.1%). In contrast, Japan only had 959 nationally flagged vessels (23.4%); the United States, 770 (43.1%); Hong Kong, 869 (43.5%); and the ROK, 826 (48.9%). In total, 70.7% of the world's ship capacity in deadweight tons was under a foreign flag. China and Hong Kong relied less on foreign-flagged vessels (57.6% and 42.7%, respectively), while Japan (84.0%), the ROK (79.4%), and the United States (77.8%) had higher shares of deadweight tonnage among foreign-flagged vessels.<sup>6</sup>

It is necessary for countries to secure a certain number of national-flagged vessels, as they can play a central role in enhancing economic security by transporting essential goods during emergencies and contingencies, thereby maintaining the citizens' livelihood. Following the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and the resulting nuclear disaster, foreign shipping companies became reluctant to call at Japanese ports. This underscored the importance of national-flagged vessels for economic security. However, rapidly increasing fleet ownership and expanding the number of national-flagged vessels is a challenging task. Therefore, Japan, the ROK, and the United States could strengthen their economic security by

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<sup>3</sup> UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), *2024 Review of Maritime Transport: Navigating Maritime Chokepoints* (Geneva: United Nations, 2024), 49.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

ensuring stable maritime transportation through cooperative agreements for the transport of essential goods during emergencies such as disasters and crises.

### *Conclusion*

Improving supply chain resilience is a top priority shared among Japan, the ROK, and the United States for strengthening national economic security. Thus, maritime transportation is a promising area for trilateral cooperation among these three states highly reliant on the seaborne trade. As illustrated by the disruptions in global distribution caused by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, it is impossible to predict all the impacts of a crisis. Therefore, even in normal times, it is necessary to consider how to secure maritime transportation during a crisis.

Japan and the ROK, as leading maritime transportation nations, can guide trilateral cooperation. As such, their cooperation and leadership could incentivize the United States to maintain its commitment to trilateral cooperation and allow the trilateral partnership to serve not only the three countries but also all like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. ◆

## Defending Energy Security Pathways: U.S.-ROK-Japan Strategic Cooperation

*Kayla Orta*

On August 18, 2023, the unprecedented Trilateral Leaders' Summit at Camp David between the United States, the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea), and Japan announced opportunities to advance a clear, concise shared agenda for the three nations.<sup>1</sup> This rejuvenation of trilateral relations signaled a return of U.S. attention to key allies in the Indo-Pacific region and the expansion of opportunities for multilateral cooperation at the nexus of national security and economic policy. However, as Donald Trump begins a nonconsecutive second term as president of the United States and South Korea's presidential office encounters ongoing domestic turmoil after the short-term declaration of martial law by President Yoon Suk Yeol and his impeachment by the National Assembly, the longevity and survivability of trilateral economic cooperation faces challenges. While energy security is vital for national independence and resilience, few are taking note. Faced with challenges at home and abroad, the United States and its security partners South Korea and Japan must continue to foster bilateral and trilateral cooperative pathways to defend energy supply chains and strengthen pathways for the rapid development of advanced technologies and critical industries.

After reviewing the current state of geoeconomics globally and the trajectory of the U.S.-ROK-Japan energy landscape, this essay argues that close energy security cooperation will be crucial to ensure the long-term sustainability of accessible low-carbon energy among the United States' leading security partners in the Indo-Pacific region. There are three main pathways for trilateral cooperation over the near to medium term: (1) expanding liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports, (2) advancing civil nuclear energy R&D, and (3) exploring hydrogen infrastructure and shipping. The essay concludes that in an increasingly unstable and

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<sup>1</sup> "The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States," White House, August 18, 2023 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/the-spirit-of-camp-david-joint-statement-of-japan-the-republic-of-korea-and-the-united-states>.

potentially economically combative Indo-Pacific, the energy security policies of regional partners are intrinsically linked to U.S. national security imperatives.

### *Global Challenges and the Importance of Energy Security*

The aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and ongoing geopolitical conflicts, including U.S.-China strategic competition and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, have called into question the continuing viability of post-Cold War neoliberal globalization, which resulted in the "securitization" of regional and global economic policy.<sup>2</sup> Global energy supply chains have been affected as well. As a result of the ongoing war in Ukraine, Europe has faced energy shortages; moreover, rearranged supply lines, increased demand for energy products, and global price spikes have caused import-dependent nations in the Indo-Pacific—including South Korea and Japan—to suffer as well. This has led to what the International Energy Agency has termed the "first truly global energy crisis,"<sup>3</sup> which is causing nations to re-evaluate energy and supply chain resiliency policies.<sup>4</sup> As the international economic order shifts away from neoliberal globalization and toward heightened protectionism and regionalism, U.S. policies at the nexus of security and economics are likely to be more important for the U.S.-ROK-Japan partnership than ever before.

As such, nation states—and, more broadly, regional security alliances—increasingly consider globalized supply chain systems, which are vulnerable to disruption and economic coercion, as carrying not merely economic risk but also deeper political and national security ramifications.<sup>5</sup> Beyond being crucial to U.S. energy trade, the Indo-Pacific region plays a key role in the development of advanced energy technology and climate-aligned infrastructure. In this context, Russia's control over energy resources and China's aggressive infrastructure initiatives pose an ongoing threat to the interests of the United States and its regional partners. The United States, South Korea, and Japan recognize

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<sup>2</sup> See Richard Higgot, "After Neoliberal Globalization: The 'Securitization' of U.S. Foreign Economic Policy in East Asia," in *Neoliberalism and Conflict in Asia after 9/11*, ed. Garry Rodan and Kevin Hewison (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> International Energy Agency (IEA), "Russia's War on Ukraine" ≈ <https://www.iea.org/topics/russias-war-on-ukraine>.

<sup>4</sup> IEA, "Global Energy Crisis" ≈ <https://www.iea.org/topics/global-energy-crisis>; and Mingsong Sun et al., "The Russia-Ukraine Conflict, Soaring International Energy Prices, and Implications for Global Economic Policies" *Heliyon* 10, no. 16 (2024) ≈ <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e34712>.

<sup>5</sup> Rana Foroohar, "After Neoliberalism: All Economics Is Local," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2022 ≈ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/after-neoliberalism-all-economics-is-local-rana-foroohar>.

the strategic necessity of energy security and its relation to competitive economic growth in key technology and defense industry sectors. Moving forward, to maintain U.S. leadership in the Indo-Pacific, Washington may need to reinvest in and capitalize on trilateral energy security cooperation to combat any Russian or Chinese dominance across these sectors.

### *Energy Security Policy: Advancing Critical Sectors*

To build trilateral momentum, the United States, South Korea, and Japan pledged during the Camp David Summit in August 2023 to reduce energy dependence on Russia, which “opens opportunities for strategic energy cooperation among the allies.”<sup>6</sup> There are three key sectors of development for U.S.-ROK-Japan relations on energy policies, mainly LNG exports, nuclear energy R&D, and the conversion from gray to green hydrogen in infrastructure and shipping.

*LNG.* First, there is an opportunity to expand U.S.-ROK-Japan trade cooperation on LNG. In recent years, the United States has emerged as the world’s largest LNG exporter. In 2023, U.S. LNG exports rose 12% from the previous year, totaling 11.9 billion cubic feet per day.<sup>7</sup> According to a 2024 report, demand for natural gas is set to rise through 2050, “reaching a level 34% above that of 2022” and totaling “26% of the global energy mix.”<sup>8</sup> As countries in the Indo-Pacific seek to reduce carbon emissions, many are looking to increase the role LNG plays in their domestic energy mixes. There is a potential for Asia to account for 60%–70% of global oil and gas imports by 2050.<sup>9</sup> As U.S. production and exports of LNG continue to rise, so too does global demand. For energy import-dependent South Korea and Japan, there is an opportunity for trilateral cooperation on LNG imports, especially as close partnership with the United States on LNG remains crucial for both countries’ energy mix.

*Civil nuclear energy production.* Second, the United States, South Korea, and Japan could seek broader avenues of cooperation in civil nuclear energy

<sup>6</sup> Victor Cha et al., “The Camp David U.S.-Japan-Korea Trilateral Summit: An Exchange among CSIS Japan and Korea Chairs,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 23, 2023 ~ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/camp-david-us-japan-korea-trilateral-summit-exchange-among-csis-japan-and-korea-chairs>.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), “The United States Was the World’s Largest Liquefied Natural Gas Exporter in 2023,” April 1, 2024 ~ <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=61683>.

<sup>8</sup> Gas Exporting Countries Forum, “Global Gas Outlook 2050,” March 2024 ~ [https://www.gecf.org/\\_resources/files/pages/global-gas-outlook-2050/gecf-global-gas-outlook-20231.pdf](https://www.gecf.org/_resources/files/pages/global-gas-outlook-2050/gecf-global-gas-outlook-20231.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> IEA, *World Energy Outlook 2024* (Paris; IEA, 2024) ~ <https://www.iea.org/reports/world-energy-outlook-2024>.

advancement and exports. With nearly 150 operational nuclear power reactors, 45 reactors under construction, and plans for 50–60 additional reactors, countries in the Indo-Pacific are leading the growth market for nuclear energy production worldwide. Japan and South Korea, both mature civil nuclear energy powers in the Indo-Pacific, respectively represented the fifth- and seventh-largest nuclear electricity suppliers globally in 2023.<sup>10</sup> While Japan’s nuclear energy industry faced setbacks after the 2011 Fukushima disaster, under the Yoon administration South Korea’s industry recently reversed course on its own “nuclear phaseout,” pushing instead to increase nuclear energy to 30% of its total energy mix by 2030.<sup>11</sup> With the U.S. Department of Commerce estimating that the future export market for nuclear reactors would be worth \$500 billion to \$740 billion over the next ten years, there are large opportunities for expanding profit avenues in the sector.<sup>12</sup>

The largest expansion, however, of nuclear energy capacity is not taking place among U.S. allies but rather in China. Between 2014 and 2024, 37 of the 70 new reactors to come online were located in China. As a fast-rising nuclear energy producer, China currently boasts 56 operable reactors, totaling 406 terawatt hours (TWh), with 30 more under construction and another 37 planned by 2035.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, China’s rise in domestic nuclear infrastructure presents a potential risk to U.S. leadership—and by extension South Korea and Japan (though to a lesser extent)—in civil nuclear energy exports. Currently, the United States maintains the largest nuclear fleet globally, totaling 94 nuclear reactors in 2024.<sup>14</sup> In 2022, the U.S. reactor fleet produced 772 TWh and accounted for nearly 30% of global electricity generation from nuclear power plants.<sup>15</sup> However, in contrast to that of many Indo-Pacific nations, the U.S. reactor fleet is old, with plants having

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<sup>10</sup> Nuclear Energy Institute, “Top 15 Nuclear Generating Countries—by Generation,” July 2024 ~ <https://www.nei.org/resources/statistics/top-15-nuclear-generating-countries>.

<sup>11</sup> Kayla Orta, “Nuclear Energy Should Be at the Forefront of Biden and Yoon’s Cooperative Agenda,” Wilson Center, Asia Dispatches, April 25, 2024 ~ <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/nuclear-energy-should-be-forefront-biden-and-yoons-cooperative-agenda>.

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of Energy, *Restoring America’s Competitive Nuclear Energy Advantage: A Strategy to Assure U.S. National Security* (Washington, D.C., 2020) ~ <https://www.energy.gov/articles/restoring-americas-competitive-nuclear-energy-advantage>.

<sup>13</sup> Dan Murtaugh and Krystal Chia, “China’s Climate Goals Hinge on a \$440 Billion Nuclear Buildout,” Bloomberg, November 2, 2021 ~ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2021-11-02/china-climate-goals-hinge-on-440-billion-nuclear-power-plan-to-rival-u-s>.

<sup>14</sup> EIA, “Nuclear Explained—U.S. Nuclear Industry,” August 24, 2023 ~ <https://www.eia.gov/energyexplained/nuclear/us-nuclear-industry.php>.

<sup>15</sup> World Nuclear Association, “Nuclear Power in USA,” August 27, 2024 ~ <https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/countries-t-z/usa-nuclear-power>.



an average of 42 years in operation.<sup>16</sup> As plants continue to age out, new investment in R&D projects, including advanced and small modular reactors (SMRs) and high-assay low-enriched uranium (HALEU) fuel, hold the key for continued leadership among the United States and its partners in the global civil nuclear market.

*The clean hydrogen economy.* Third, the hydrogen economy, given its potential for energy production with near-zero greenhouse gas emissions, is another pathway for U.S.-ROK-Japan collaboration on future energy technology. Currently, the United States produces 10 million metric tons (MMT) of hydrogen per year; however, U.S. usage of natural gas as a feedstock for hydrogen production increased nearly 40% in recent years. During the Biden administration, the bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, passed in 2021, authorized \$9.5 billion for clean hydrogen project development in the United States.<sup>17</sup> This passage spurred the U.S. Department of Energy's 2023 U.S. National Clean Hydrogen Strategy and Roadmap, which details growth and utilization scenarios for U.S.-produced clean hydrogen of up to 50 MMT per year by 2050.<sup>18</sup>

Presently, Indo-Pacific nations are leading the global trend for investment and development in hydrogen technology. Having established the world's first hydrogen law in 2021, South Korea is pursuing hydrogen through domestic infrastructure and energy R&D projects. In May 2024 the ROK Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy launched the first government auction for clean hydrogen-fired power generation for up to 6,500 gigawatt hours of electricity over a fifteen-year period starting by 2028.<sup>19</sup> Recently, Japan launched its own \$20 billion Green Innovation Fund, which includes investment of nearly \$700 million for green hydrogen generation as part of the \$2.7 billion total allocation toward expanding large-scale hydrogen generation projects.<sup>20</sup> As both Asian nations push forward plans for hydrogen economies, the new U.S. administration may see value in cross-development alongside South Korea and Japan.

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<sup>16</sup> EIA, "Nuclear Explained—U.S. Nuclear Industry."

<sup>17</sup> *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act*, Public Law 117-58, 117th Cong. (2021) ~ <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/3684>.

<sup>18</sup> U.S. Department of Energy, *U.S. National Clean Hydrogen Strategy and Roadmap* (Washington, D.C., June 2023) ~ [https://www.hydrogen.energy.gov/docs/hydrogenprogramlibraries/pdfs/us-national-clean-hydrogen-strategy-roadmap.pdf?sfvrsn=c425b44f\\_5](https://www.hydrogen.energy.gov/docs/hydrogenprogramlibraries/pdfs/us-national-clean-hydrogen-strategy-roadmap.pdf?sfvrsn=c425b44f_5).

<sup>19</sup> Leigh Collins, "South Korea Launches World's First Auction for Clean-Hydrogen Power Generation," *Hydrogen Insights*, May 24, 2024 ~ <https://www.hydrogeninsight.com/power/south-korea-launches-world-s-first-auction-for-clean-hydrogen-power-generation/2-1-1649557>.

<sup>20</sup> Jane Nakano, "Japan's Hydrogen Industrial Strategy," Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 21, 2021 ~ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/japans-hydrogen-industrial-strategy>.

### *Pathways Forward: Securing Energy Trajectories*

Clearly, energy security is vital for national independence and resilience. Unless key sectors of cooperation are delineated and defended, pressing domestic concerns are likely to overshadow U.S.-ROK-Japan energy cooperation. Moving forward, the United States, South Korea, and Japan will need to deepen bilateral and trilateral pathways for strengthening and protecting energy supply chains. Below are several possible areas for feasible policy coordination and implementation among the trilateral partners.

- *Address energy-related competition and coercion from China and Russia in the Indo-Pacific region.* As China and Russia work to supplant the leadership of the United States and key Indo-Pacific allies in critical energy sectors, the Trump administration should aim to develop counterstrategies, including monitoring and assessing their energy projects. The development of U.S.-ROK-Japan strategies to promote energy security and reduce reliance on adversarial nations for energy imports will be key.
- *Enhance LNG exports and partnerships with major importing countries, including South Korea and Japan.* With the United States emerging as the world's leading LNG exporter, there is an opportunity for the government to support domestic infrastructure buildup (i.e., LNG terminals, including gas liquefaction facilities and pre-shipping storage) to boost LNG exports to Indo-Pacific countries, focusing on energy import-dependent nations like South Korea and Japan. As the Trump administration returns to office, it is an opportune time to capitalize on U.S. strategic partnerships with Indo-Pacific nations to secure long-term LNG export contracts and pursue advancements in LNG carrier technology and designs.
- *Expand climate-focused initiatives and R&D investment in civil nuclear energy and clean hydrogen infrastructure.* Moving forward, U.S.-ROK-Japan cooperation on energy trade policy should prioritize and adapt to emerging, low-carbon technologies, including green hydrogen, SMRs, and HALEU fuel development. From innovations in hydrogen production and shipping to advanced nuclear reactors, Washington should foster economic collaboration and R&D investment with Seoul and Tokyo.

As the Trump administration returns to the White House, the U.S. energy policy in the Indo-Pacific region presents both challenges and significant opportunities. Should the United States aim to enhance its cross-regional energy policy through the pathways discussed above, the U.S.-ROK-Japan partnership will be crucial for building energy supply chain resiliency and ensuring long-term stability in the dynamic Indo-Pacific region and beyond. ♦

## Trilateral U.S.-ROK-Japan Cooperation on the DPRK Cyberthreat

*So Jeong Kim*

In the area of cybersecurity, the rapid advancement of technology has not only given the world a lack of time to prepare for the challenges it has brought but also presents the daunting task of establishing new standards for operating in this environment. This new reality extends to the realm of geopolitics, where conflicts in cyberspace are shaping international security in unforeseen ways.

This challenge is especially evident from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea), whose relatively weak conventional military and ruinous economy have led the state to utilize cyber capabilities in efforts to gain an asymmetric advantage alongside its development of nuclear weapons. Both the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) and the United States recognize the increasing cyber threat that the DPRK poses, leading the two states to work together in efforts to counter its attacks and to establish a joint "strategic cybersecurity cooperation framework." This cooperation has expanded to include Japan after the trilateral meeting at Camp David in 2023. In November 2024 the three countries reaffirmed that they are "committed to expanding trilateral efforts to counter the DPRK's malicious cyber program and illicit revenue generation, including by collaborating to build capacity across the Indo-Pacific region to better protect against illicit DPRK activities."<sup>1</sup>

### *Unpredictable Cyber Threats from the DPRK*

In contrast to its earlier focus on targeting South Korea, the DPRK has in recent years expanded its cyberattacks globally, including in Europe. The regime in Pyongyang has placed particular emphasis on the theft of advanced technologies, thus making it critical to understand North Korea's cyber strategy both in the context of its nuclear missile program and in terms of preventing the regime from securing technological superiority.

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<sup>1</sup> "Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States," White House, November 15, 2024 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/11/15/joint-statement-of-japan-the-republic-of-korea-and-the-united-states>.

Since the early 2000s, the DPRK has consistently conducted cyberattacks targeting the ROK. Initially, these attacks involved simple methods such as the theft of confidential information, personal data, and economic gain through distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks, which sought to disrupt website traffic and activities.<sup>2</sup> Over time, and with clear political motivations, North Korea expanded its targets to include the United States, such as by hacking Sony Pictures Entertainment in 2014. North Korea has engaged in fraudulent SWIFT transactions targeting banks, fraudulent ATM cashouts, and ransomware, as well as cryptocurrency heists against exchanges and gaming platforms.<sup>3</sup> North Korean IT workers have also sought jobs at foreign companies under false identities, generating revenue for the regime while also laying the groundwork for further exploitation.<sup>4</sup> Following UN sanctions in 2016, the DPRK intensified its attacks on financial infrastructure, extending to virtual asset theft, as a primary means of securing funds for political stability. Given the rapid advancements in computing technology since then, such as artificial intelligence and quantum computing, as well as greater alignment among pro-DPRK countries, future cybersecurity policies necessitate international cooperation and coordination.

The annual threat assessment report of the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence for 2023 highlights DPRK's cyber threats:

North Korea's cyber program poses a sophisticated and agile espionage, cybercrime, and attack threat. Pyongyang's cyber forces have matured and are fully capable of achieving a range of strategic objectives against diverse targets....[Its] program continues to adapt to global trends in cybercrime by conducting cryptocurrency heists, diversifying its range of financially motivated cyber operations, and continuing to leverage advanced social engineering techniques.<sup>5</sup>

Through both direct and indirect management of hacking groups such as Lazarus, the DPRK leverages the proceeds from hacking as a new

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<sup>2</sup> So Jeong Kim and Sunha Bae, "Korean Policies of Cybersecurity and Data Resilience," in "The Korean Way with Data," ed. Evan A. Feigenbaum and Michael R. Nelson, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 2021.

<sup>3</sup> "North Korea State-Sponsored Cyber Threat: Advisories," U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency ≈ <https://www.cisa.gov/topics/cyber-threats-and-advisories/nation-state-cyber-actors/north-korea/publications>.

<sup>4</sup> Codi Starks et al., "Staying a Step Ahead: Mitigating the DPRK IT Worker Threat," Mandiant, September 23, 2024 ≈ <https://cloud.google.com/blog/topics/threat-intelligence/mitigating-dprk-it-worker-threat>.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community* (Washington, D.C., February 2023), 21.

source of funding. It is anticipated that the country will continue to pose the most significant state-sponsored threat to the financial services sector in the coming years unless the risks and costs it faces outweigh the potential financial gains.

### *Strategic Cybersecurity Cooperation Framework*

South Korea's cyber diplomacy has been driven by the need to resist cyberattacks from North Korea and seeks cooperation with like-minded countries for this end. Among the measures taken, the bilateral cyber dialogue, the U.S.-ROK Cyber Policy Consultations, which has met seven times since 2012, stands out.<sup>6</sup> In April 2023, ROK and U.S. leaders announced the "Strategic Cybersecurity Cooperation Framework between the Republic of Korea and the United States."<sup>7</sup> This framework expands the bilateral alliance to the cyber domain: "recognizing the alliance applies to cyberspace, the two countries intend to begin discussions regarding how the Mutual Defense Treaty would apply."<sup>8</sup>

This framework upholds the principles articulated during the 2022 ROK-U.S. summit, which underscored the significance of cybersecurity as a national policy and strategic priority. Over the past two years, the two countries have made a dramatic shift toward fostering greater cooperation on cyber issues and significant progress in regularizing workshops and expanding cooperation to trilateral and multilateral settings.<sup>9</sup>

The countries' presidents pledged that the United States and the ROK "will significantly expand cooperation to confront a range of cyber threats from the DPRK, including but not limited to, state-sponsored cyber-attacks," and "will continue to deepen ROK-U.S. cooperation on regional and international cyber policy."<sup>10</sup> The joint statement included a wide range of areas for cyber cooperation, including deterrence of

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<sup>6</sup> Sunha Bae, "The Expanding Horizon of U.S.-ROK Cybersecurity Cooperation: From Military Security to Cyber Defense," Korean Association of International Studies, Korea On Point, November 25, 2024 ~ <https://koreaponpoint.org/view.php?idx=357>.

<sup>7</sup> "Strategic Cybersecurity Cooperation Framework between the Republic of Korea and the United States," Office of the President of Korea, April 20, 2023 ~ <https://www.president.go.kr/download/644956452f9e3>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Jenny Jun and So Jeong Kim, "U.S.-South Korea Cyber Cooperation: Towards the Higher-Hanging Fruits," in "Broadening the Alliance: New Frontiers in US-South Korea Cooperation," special issue, *Korea Policy* 2, no. 1 (2024).

<sup>10</sup> "United States–Republic of Korea Leaders' Joint Statement," White House, May 21, 2022 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/21/united-states-republic-of-korea-leaders-joint-statement>.

cyber adversaries, cybersecurity for critical infrastructure, combatting of cybercrime and money laundering, security for cryptocurrency and blockchain applications, capacity building, cyber exercises, information sharing, military-to-military cyber cooperation, and other international security issues.<sup>11</sup> The primary objective of ROK-U.S. cooperation is to advance an open and collaborative approach aimed at ensuring the security and integrity of the internet and cyberspace.

Seoul and Washington have produced tangible results. In particular, the joint statement anticipated various collaborations in cyber technology application and national security, with continuous follow-up measures. The U.S. and ROK cyber commands have signed a memorandum of cooperation and begun working-level cooperation, with Seoul joining the Counter-Ransomware Initiative. Cooperation has achieved remarkable results, in particular, in addressing North Korean information technology personnel's foreign exchange earnings and in responding to virtual asset theft through the Cyber Cooperation Working Group.<sup>12</sup>

Since the August 2023 trilateral summit of the United States, South Korea, and Japan at Camp David, cooperation between South Korea and Japan has surged. According to the joint statement issued immediately after the summit, the three countries agreed to cooperate on thwarting North Korea's illicit cyber activities and its generation and funneling of related funds for use in its nuclear missile program. Specifically, they agreed to launch a high-level cyber consultation group to devise measures to block North Korean cybercrimes and strengthen the joint response capability against global cyber threats. As a concrete result of this new agreement, the three states jointly condemned in strong terms North Korea's ballistic missile launches, including its intercontinental ballistic missile launch in December 2023.

Since then, the three countries have convened periodically, including in September 2024 at the third meeting of the Trilateral Diplomatic Working Group to counter DPRK cyber threats. Underscoring the historic cooperation established at the Camp David Summit, the group will continue to coordinate on a wide range of trilateral actions, including efforts to prevent DPRK cryptocurrency heists, disrupt illicit IT worker

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<sup>11</sup> "United States–Republic of Korea Leaders' Joint Statement.

<sup>12</sup> So Jeong Kim, "The U.S. National Cybersecurity Strategy: Main Issues and Implications for South Korea," Institute for National Security Strategy, Issue Brief 99, no. 13, 2023, 10.

networks, engage partners on the DPRK cyberthreat, and develop capacity-building assistance.<sup>13</sup>

### *Challenging Dynamics in Northeast Asia*

Geopolitical tensions and conflicts are intensifying in Northeast Asia, and as alliance dynamics extend into cyberspace, efforts to ease tensions are becoming increasingly challenging. The growing closeness between Russia and North Korea, particularly the treaty they signed in June 2024, has raised significant concerns. The treaty not only underscores that traditional alliances now extend into cyberspace but also explicitly states the following:

[T]he parties will develop exchanges and cooperation, and also actively encourage joint research in the field of science and technology, including space, biology, peaceful atomic energy, artificial intelligence, information technology, etc.... The two sides shall cooperate with each other in the field of international information security and aspire to strengthen the bilateral cooperation in the way of developing the relevant legal and normative foundation and deepening dialogue between institutions, etc.<sup>14</sup>

It also declares support for cooperation on standards, implying that the two states could work together on developing norms for governing cyberspace and other areas of technology.

This treaty between Russia and the DPRK is expected to have a significant impact on Northeast Asian geopolitics in terms of science, technology, and cybersecurity. In Article 18 the treaty outlines cooperation on internet infrastructure management, pledges work against malicious or criminal use of the internet, and defends the right to state-centric sovereignty and noninterference by third countries in cyberspace activities, among others. These provisions of the treaty indicate North Korea's active participation in the competitive processes of cybersecurity norm-building.<sup>15</sup>

North Korea continues to enhance its cyberattack capabilities, investing human and material resources heavily into this effort. The regime's singular focus on offensive operations gives it a distinct advantage. There is no denying that if its resources and capabilities are leveraged

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<sup>13</sup> "Third United States–Japan–Republic of Korea Trilateral Diplomatic Working Group Meeting on Democratic People's Republic of Korea Cyber Activities," U.S. Department of State, Media note, September 6, 2024.

<sup>14</sup> For the text of the agreement, see "Full Text of Russia–DPRK–Russia Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," KCNA Watch, June 20, 2024 ~ <https://kcnawatch.xyz/newstream/1718870859-459880358/dprk-russia-treaty-on-comprehensive-strategic-partnership>.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

for financial or political objectives, the impact could be significant. For example, North Korea recently announced policies aimed to boost its local regional development. To enforce these policies, it has not only accelerated support for and from rural governments but also increased cyberattacks targeting ROK local-level officials, municipal employees, and organizations in the construction and machinery sectors, possibly in an effort to acquire technical data that could support its construction and machinery industries.<sup>16</sup> This demonstrates how hacking groups are being mobilized to achieve state policy objectives.

In this regard, there is also a high likelihood that North Korea could act as a proxy for Russia in conducting cyberattacks against nations supporting Ukraine.<sup>17</sup> This potential for cyber collaboration further underscores the growing complexities of the Russia-DPRK partnership in cyberspace. At the same time, while North Korea supports Russia during its ongoing war in Ukraine, DPRK hackers have breached Russian defense companies, stealing missile technology and other critical data.<sup>18</sup> If such technology transfers are already occurring unofficially and indirectly, the frequency of similar incidents is likely to increase in the future.

### *Conclusion*

Cybersecurity cooperation between the United States and South Korea, as well as between the United States and Japan is already well-established, but cooperation between South Korea and Japan is just beginning. Thus, priority should be placed on expanding ROK-Japan trust and information sharing regarding cybersecurity issues, with the common threat of North Korea being an excellent starting point. Collaboration is also occurring and deepening through other minilateral formats, such as the Quad, which includes Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. Beyond cybersecurity, there are numerous areas of cooperation that can strengthen bilateral relations between South Korea and Japan and elevate them within


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<sup>16</sup> “Bughan haekingjojig-ui geonseol – gige bun-ya gisuljeolchwi juui” [Advisory on North Korean Hacking Groups’ Theft of Technology in the Construction and Machinery Sectors], National Cyber Security Center (ROK), August 5, 2024 ≈ [https://www.ncsc.go.kr:4018/main/cop/bbs/selectBoardArticle.do?bbsId=SecurityAdvice\\_main&nttlId=146934&pageIndex=1&searchCnd2=#LINK](https://www.ncsc.go.kr:4018/main/cop/bbs/selectBoardArticle.do?bbsId=SecurityAdvice_main&nttlId=146934&pageIndex=1&searchCnd2=#LINK).

<sup>17</sup> So Jeong Kim, “Leobug sinjoyag-ui saibeonbo ham-ui mich sisajeom” [Cybersecurity Implications of the North Korea–Russia Treaty], Institute for National Security Strategy, Issue Brief, July 22, 2024.

<sup>18</sup> James Pearson and Christopher Bing, “Exclusive: North Korean Hackers Breached Top Russian Missile Maker,” Reuters, August 7, 2023 ≈ <https://www.reuters.com/technology/north-korean-hackers-breached-top-russian-missile-maker-2023-08-07>.



the ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral framework. It is hoped that this essay will serve as a starting point for considering a valuable area of collaboration and building an enhanced relationship between South Korea and Japan, as well as among all three partners, in the future. 

## How Will Trump's Second Presidency Shape U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateral Cooperation on North Korea?

*Ellen Kim*

On November 15, 2024, the leaders of the United States, the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea), and Japan met for a trilateral summit on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Lima, Peru. This marked the first trilateral leaders' meeting since Shigeru Ishiba became Japan's prime minister and the last meeting during Joe Biden's presidency. The three leaders emphasized the critical importance of continued trilateral cooperation while condemning the actions of North Korean and Russian leaders for "dangerously [expanding] Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine" in the wake of North Korea's deployment of troops to the Kursk region.<sup>1</sup> The joint statement from the meeting highlighted the notable progress made in trilateral cooperation since the Camp David Summit. This progress includes implementing real-time missile data sharing, executing the trilateral multidomain joint exercise Freedom Edge, and signing a memorandum of cooperation to establish the Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework to enhance and regularize defense engagements among the three countries.<sup>2</sup> The statement also announced the establishment of the Trilateral Secretariat, demonstrating the leaders' commitment to ensuring the continuity of trilateral cooperation in the future even in the event of a government change in any of the three countries.<sup>3</sup>

However, Donald Trump's re-election in November 2024 and President Yoon Suk Yeol's impeachment in December 2024, following his sudden declaration of martial law, have created uncertainty regarding the future of trilateral cooperation. In light of these political developments, the

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<sup>1</sup> "Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States," White House, November 15, 2024 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/11/15/joint-statement-of-japan-the-republic-of-korea-and-the-united-states>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.; and "Japan–United States–Republic of Korea Trilateral Ministerial Joint Press Statement," U.S. Department of Defense, July 24, 2024 ~ <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3852146/japan-united-states-republic-of-korea-trilateral-ministerial-joint-press-statem>.

<sup>3</sup> Victor Cha, "The Legacy of Camp David: The United States, South Korea, and Japan to Establish a Trilateral Secretariat," Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), September 25, 2024 ~ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/legacy-camp-david-united-states-south-korea-and-japan-establish-trilateral-secretariat>.

direction of trilateral cooperation on North Korea will largely depend on three factors: Trump's "America first" policy, the Trump administration's diplomacy toward North Korea, and the bilateral ROK-Japan relationship.

### *Trump's America-First Policy*

The first factor is the extent to which Trump's America-first policy affects U.S. ties with South Korea and Japan, as any discord or strain in the U.S.-ROK and U.S.-Japan alliances could weaken the foundation of trilateral cooperation. As of this writing, how this America-first policy will materialize remains to be seen, but there are growing concerns in Seoul and Tokyo that it could lead to diminished U.S. engagement in Asia at a time when the region is grappling with increasingly complex and dangerous challenges.<sup>4</sup> Trump's demands for NATO allies to shoulder a "fair" share of defense costs have also raised alarms that Asian allies may face similar pressure.<sup>5</sup> In 2023, Japan and South Korea spent \$50.2 billion (1.2% of GDP) and \$47.9 billion (2.8% of GDP), respectively, on defense.<sup>6</sup> In Seoul, Trump's pre-election remarks that South Korea would have been paying \$10 billion annually for hosting U.S. troops if he were president have fueled speculation about whether the recently concluded Special Measures Agreement could be reopened for negotiation.<sup>7</sup>

Trade is another area where disputes could arise as a result of Trump's America-first policy. Japan, South Korea, and other countries with substantial trade surpluses with the United States could become targets of the proposed universal tariff of 10%–20%.<sup>8</sup> In 2023 the U.S. trade deficits with Japan and South Korea in goods were \$71.2 billion and \$51.4 billion, respectively.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Matthew P. Goodman, "Japan Braces for Trump 2.0," Council on Foreign Relations, November 21, 2024 ~ <https://www.cfr.org/article/japan-braces-trump-20>.

<sup>5</sup> Kanishka Singh "Trump Again Conditions U.S. Help to NATO Allies on Their Paying 'Fair Share,'" Reuters, March 20, 2024 ~ <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-again-conditions-us-help-nato-allies-their-paying-fair-share-2024-03-19>; and "Trump Demands NATO Allies Spend at Least 3 Percent of GDP on Defense," *Korea Times*, August 27, 2024 ~ [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/11/113\\_381271.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/11/113_381271.html).

<sup>6</sup> Nan Tian et al., "SIPRI Fact Sheet: Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2023," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, April 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Kim Eun Joong and Lee Jae-eun, "Trump Says 'Money Machine' Korea Should Pay \$10 Billion a Year for U.S. Troops," *Chosun Daily*, October 17, 2024 ~ <https://www.chosun.com/english/national-en/2024/10/17/EPKQS6EJ5RANBNEZAJL62DXU5M>.

<sup>8</sup> Ellen Kim, "The Korean Peninsula: Make or Break?" in "The Global Impact of the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election," ed. Victor Cha and Nicholas Szechenyi, CSIS, September 2024; and "Trump Tariffs May Target Japanese Cars, Economist Says," *Japan Times*, November 23, 2024 ~ <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/business/2024/11/23/trump-japanese-cars-tariffs>.

<sup>9</sup> "U.S. International Trade in Goods and Services, December and Annual 2023," U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, February 7, 2024 ~ <https://www.bea.gov/news/2024/us-international-trade-goods-and-services-december-and-annual-2023>.

## *Diplomacy toward North Korea*

Second, the Trump administration's policy toward North Korea will be the most influential factor shaping and driving future trilateral cooperation. While the administration has yet to announce a concrete policy, Trump's campaign speeches raised the possibility of resuming dialogue with Kim Jong-un.<sup>10</sup> In August, for instance, Trump said, "getting along [with Kim Jong-un] is a good thing. It's not a bad thing."<sup>11</sup> This speculation gained further credence in late November when it was reported that the Trump team was considering early engagement with Kim.<sup>12</sup> For the Trump administration, resuming personal diplomacy with Kim would be necessary if it wants to prevent North Korea from sending additional troops to support Russia in the Ukraine war, which Trump has vowed to resolve as president.

Whether Kim will respond to the offer remains unclear, as there seems to be little incentive for the regime to engage with the United States—at least for now.<sup>13</sup> For one, following on their June 2024 treaty, Russia is essentially providing North Korea with what it needs, from hard cash, to food and oil, to advanced military technology. Moreover, North Korea is no longer under the heavy international sanctions it faced in 2017–19.<sup>14</sup> As a result, there is no pressing need for Kim to meet with Trump as he did before. In other words, if Kim returns to the negotiation table, after four years of boycotting diplomatic overtures from the Biden administration, he is likely to demand more than just sanctions relief. During the National Defense Development–2024 arms exhibition in Pyongyang in late November 2024, Kim dismissed the need for dialogue with the United States, stating, "We have already explored every possible avenue of negotiation with the United States" and denouncing hostile U.S. policy toward North Korea.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Choe Sang-hun, "Will Trump Rekindle a Bromance with Kim Jong-un? South Koreans Worry," *New York Times*, November 11, 2024 ~ <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/11/world/asia/south-korea-trump-kim-jong-un.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Song Sang-ho, "Trump Says Getting Along with Kim Jong-un Is 'Good Thing,'" *Yonhap*, August 31, 2024 ~ <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20240831000400315>.

<sup>12</sup> Trevor Hunnicut, "Exclusive: Trump Team Weighs Direct Talks with North Korea's Kim in New Diplomatic Push, Sources Say," *Reuters*, November 27, 2024 ~ <https://www.reuters.com/world/trump-team-weighs-direct-talks-with-north-koreas-kim-new-diplomatic-push-sources-2024-11-26>.

<sup>13</sup> Ellen Kim, "How Kim Jong-un Could Challenge Donald Trump's Foreign Policy in 2025," *National Interest*, November 21, 2024 ~ <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-kim-jong-un-could-challenge-donald-trump's-foreign-policy-2025-213821>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Colin Zwirko, "Kim Jong Un Shows Off New Drones and ICBMs at Arms Expo, Rejects Talks with U.S.," *NK News*, November 22, 2024 ~ <https://www.nknews.org/2024/11/kim-jong-un-shows-off-north-koreas-new-drones-largest-icbms-at-weapons-expo>.

## *Bilateral ROK-Japan Relationship*

Third, maintaining the positive momentum between South Korea and Japan is essential for the continuity of future trilateral cooperation. It is no overstatement that the improvement in the bilateral relationship under Yoon Suk Yool and Fumio Kishida was the key to the reinvigoration of U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral cooperation. The agreement between Yoon and Ishiba at their first bilateral summit on the sidelines of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) meetings in October 2024 to continue enhancing bilateral cooperation is a positive sign.<sup>16</sup> However, challenges to ROK-Japan cooperation remain. Recent tensions surrounding the separate Sado Mines memorial events showed the fragile nature of bilateral ties, given the long-standing historical issues between the two states.<sup>17</sup> This vulnerability could be further exacerbated by a potential policy shift from a new government in South Korea that might take a firmer stance on historical issues. The main opposition Democratic Party has criticized Yoon's approach to the wartime forced labor issue, urging him to represent "the weight of history, responsibility on our people, and the pain of forced labor victim."<sup>18</sup> When Yoon's foreign policy, specifically regarding Japan, was referenced in the initial impeachment motion against him (although it was removed from the second impeachment motion), this sparked acute concerns in Tokyo and Washington that the progress made in ROK-Japan bilateral relations and trilateral cooperation during Yoon's presidency could deteriorate.<sup>19</sup>

## *Conclusion*

The U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral framework has emerged as one of the most crucial mechanisms, along with the G-7, to address growing

<sup>16</sup> Hyonhee Shin, "South Korea's Yoon, Japan's Ishiba Meet on Sidelines of ASEAN Gathering," Reuters, October 10, 2024 ~ <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-koreas-yoon-japans-ishiba-meet-sidelines-asean-gathering-2024-10-10>.

<sup>17</sup> Kim Tong-hyung, "South Korea Will Not Attend Sado Mines Memorial Event in Japan amid Lingering Historical Tensions," Associated Press, November 23, 2024 ~ <https://apnews.com/article/south-korea-japan-sado-mine-history-tensions-8573d6947b8cc8f0be280dd9b64c8529>.

<sup>18</sup> Kim Na-young, "DP Urges Yoon to Use Summit with Kishida to Produce Compensation Plan for Forced Labor Victims," Yonhap, March 16, 2023 ~ <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230316003651315>.

<sup>19</sup> Young Gyo Kim, "U.S. Officials Stress Collaboration with Japan, South Korea amid Seoul Leadership Crisis," Voice of America, December 12, 2024 ~ <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-officials-stress-collaboration-with-japan-south-korea-amid-seoul-leadership-crisis/7899536.html>; and Jio Kamata, "Why Japan Is Worried after the Impeachment of South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol," *Diplomat*, December 17, 2024 ~ <https://thediplomat.com/2024/12/why-japan-is-worried-after-the-impeachment-of-south-korean-president-yoon-suk-yeol>.

challenges from North Korea, particularly since Russia's and China's use of veto power has effectively paralyzed the UN Security Council's ability to act. To ensure this trilateral framework remains effective and sustainable, the second Trump administration should maintain close policy consultations with its counterparts in Seoul and Tokyo, even if it chooses to resume dialogue with North Korea. It is also important for the U.S. administration to delink North Korea policy from other bilateral issues with South Korea and Japan. Any sign of discord or weakness in bilateral and trilateral cooperation could embolden North Korea to exploit divisions and weaken collective U.S.-ROK-Japan security cooperation. Despite the political turmoil in South Korea, Washington and Tokyo should maintain their engagement with Seoul. The visit of the U.S. and Japanese foreign ministers to South Korea in January 2025 was a positive sign, and this should continue under the second Trump administration.

South Korea and Japan should use their shared policy alignment on North Korea as a fulcrum to strengthen the bilateral and trilateral partnerships. As both countries approach the 60th anniversary of the normalization of their diplomatic relations in 2025, they should also enhance their efforts to advance a future-oriented partnership. Ultimately, sustained U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral cooperation is in the shared interest of all three countries and is vital to counter the escalating threats from North Korea and ensure peace and stability in Asia. ◆

## The Implications of U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateral Exercises as Strategic Communications

*Shin-ae Lee*

Recent trilateral military exercises among the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea), the United States, and Japan have achieved significant advancements, marked by an increase in frequency, scope, and sophistication. The progress made in exercising together signals the three countries' growing resolve and capabilities to deepen their security partnership amid rising uncertainties in the Indo-Pacific. Essentially, trilateral exercises serve as a form of strategic communication, conveying messages aligned with the three parties' political and security objectives.

This essay explores convergent and divergent elements in the deterrence messages conveyed by the ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral exercises from August 2022 to November 2024, highlighting shared goals and gaps as well as implications for future cooperation. It examines the deepening trilateral partnership on shared security challenges, while illuminating nuanced divergence that may complicate trilateral collaboration. The essay concludes with a brief discussion on the prospects for trilateral exercises during the second Trump presidency, while taking into account the added uncertainties after Yoon Suk Yeol's impeachment.

### *Convergent Messaging in Trilateral Exercises*

Joint exercises facilitate participants' objectives through influence and engagement, signifying their value as a means of strategic communication. They are designed to shape perceptions, behaviors, and attitudes in support of political and military objectives—reassuring allies and deterring adversaries,<sup>1</sup> as well as restraining partners from escalating conflict.<sup>2</sup> In this respect, joint exercises reflect “political, military and geopolitical intents”

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<sup>1</sup> Beatrice Heuser and Harold Simpson, “The Missing Political Dimension of Military Exercises,” *RUSI Journal* 162, no. 3 (2017): 22.

<sup>2</sup> See Raymond Kuo and Brian D. Blankenship, “Deterrence and Restraint: Do Joint Military Exercises Escalate Conflict?” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 66, no. 1 (2021): 3–31.

and provide “valuable insights into a nation’s interests, operational art and strategic thinking.”<sup>3</sup>

Notably, as South Korea, the United States, and Japan face severe security challenges, trilateral exercises are playing an increasingly vital role in supporting both individual and shared security interests and objectives by delivering deterrence messages. They send a particularly strong deterrence message to North Korea through words and actions, adjusted for scope and scale in direct response to Pyongyang’s intensifying provocations.<sup>4</sup> Turning political leaders’ commitments into tangible actions through joint exercises—such as establishing real-time data sharing on North Korean missile-warning and initiating a formally named multidomain joint exercise—has made trilateral messages more convincing. Additionally, the United States is deploying strategic assets, including nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, B-52s, and B-1 Lancers, more frequently for trilateral exercises, further strengthening messages of deterrence.

Trilateral exercises are additionally deliberately broadening the sphere of deterrence messaging beyond the Korean Peninsula. Japan’s messages most often promote the strengthening of a “rules-based free and open international order.”<sup>5</sup> While the United States tends to emphasize supporting a “free and open Indo-Pacific” in its messages, this goal basically encompasses a similar desire to safeguard the rules-based order in the region.<sup>6</sup> South Korea, although remaining more cautious than its other two partners, also conveys that trilateral exercises aim to “establish a rules-based international order.”<sup>7</sup> Most notable is that during the first trilateral multidomain exercise in June 2024, the three partners issued a common message: “Freedom Edge expresses the will of the ROK, U.S. and Japan to promote trilateral interoperability and protect freedom for

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<sup>3</sup> Daivis Petraitis, Vira Ratsiborynska, and Valeriy Akimenko, *Russia’s Strategic Exercises: Messages and Implications* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2020), 8.

<sup>4</sup> “U.S., Japan, and the Republic of Korea Conduct a Trilateral Ballistic Missile Defense Exercise,” U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Public Affairs, October 6, 2022 ~ <https://www.cpf.navy.mil/Newsroom/News/Article/3182274/us-japan-and-the-republic-of-korea-conduct-a-trilateral-ballistic-missile-defen>; and Eun-jung Kim, “S. Korea, U.S., Japan Stage Joint Naval Drills Involving Aircraft Carrier,” Yonhap, November 26, 2023 ~ <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20231126003200315>.

<sup>5</sup> See “JS Kirisame Conducted a Japan-U.S.-ROK Trilateral Exercise,” Self-Defense Fleet (Japan), November 27, 2023 ~ [https://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/sf/english/news/2023/11/1127\\_5.html](https://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/sf/english/news/2023/11/1127_5.html).

<sup>6</sup> White House, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, D.C., October 2022), 8–11 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Eun-jung Kim, “S. Korea, U.S., Japan Stage Joint Naval Drill Involving Aircraft Carrier,” Yonhap, January 17, 2024 ~ <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20240117002651315>.



peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific, including the Korean Peninsula.”<sup>8</sup> Collectively, such messages signify their deepening commitment to jointly address broader security concerns in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in ensuring a rules-based order.

### *Divergent Messages in Trilateral Exercises*

Although the three countries have committed to joint exercises with shared goals, their messages are not always fully aligned due to differing priorities and geopolitical considerations. South Korea has placed great emphasis on the North Korean threat in all of its messages regarding trilateral exercises, whereas Japan has referenced North Korea slightly more than the United States has, but both have often omitted mention of the country from their narratives. South Korea’s messages convey a greater sense of urgency for collaborative action to address the North Korean threat than those of the two other partners. For the ROK, North Korea remains “the most pressing” security challenge, given the intensifying threat from its weapons of mass destruction right at the ROK’s doorstep.<sup>9</sup> South Korean public support for trilateral security cooperation predominantly stems from the potential to manage North Korea (64.9%), with less emphasis on China (20.5%).<sup>10</sup>

Given its geographic proximity, North Korea poses a significant threat to Japan’s security. However, Japan’s public support for cooperation centers more on containing China (48.1%) than North Korea (40.6%).<sup>11</sup> Tokyo recognizes the need for additional attention in addressing China, which it regards as “an unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge” to both its national security and the global order based on the rule of law.<sup>12</sup> This approach contrasts with that of Seoul, which avoids directly labeling

<sup>8</sup> Yun-hwan Chae, “S. Korea, U.S., Japan Hold 1st Trilateral ‘Freedom Edge’ Exercise,” Yonhap, June 27, 2024 ≈ <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20240627006400315>; “First Execution of Multi-Domain JPN-ROK-U.S. Exercise ‘Freedom Edge,’” Joint Staff (Japan), Press Release, June 27, 2024 ≈ [https://www.mod.go.jp/js/pdf/2024/p20240627\\_01e.pdf](https://www.mod.go.jp/js/pdf/2024/p20240627_01e.pdf); and “First Execution of Multi-Domain Japan-ROK-U.S. Exercise Freedom Edge, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Public Affairs, June 27, 2024 ≈ <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/3819224/trilateral-statement-first-execution-of-multi-domain-japan-rok-us-exercise-free>.

<sup>9</sup> Office of National Security (South Korea), *The Yoon Suk Yeol Administration’s National Security Strategy* (Seoul, June 2023), 10–11.

<sup>10</sup> This survey was conducted by Kangwon National University and the Hankook Research of South Korea during March 20–24, 2024. See “ROK-Japan Relations Perception Survey Report,” Hankook Research, April 2024, 21.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Cabinet Secretariat of Japan, *National Security Strategy of Japan* (Tokyo, 2022), 8–9 ≈ <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/221216anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>.

China as a security threat. While Washington also views North Korea as a national security threat, its primary concern lies in fundamental challenges to reshape the existing international order. In this context, U.S. concern over China as “the most consequential geopolitical challenge” surpasses other challenges.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, both Washington and Tokyo are increasingly prioritizing cooperation on broader regional security challenges beyond the Korean Peninsula. A joint trilateral commitment to bolstering regional security and upholding a free and open Indo-Pacific features prominently in U.S. and Japanese messages. However, South Korea has been reserved in engaging with messaging related to regional security challenges that are often linked to China, such as ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific and addressing challenges to the status quo, that could displease China over perceived targeting. Seoul has been grappling with how to strengthen its endorsement of trilateral security cooperation while aiming to avoid a backlash from Beijing, a challenge that has become more pronounced over time. In light of the escalating concerns voiced by the United States and Japan regarding the China challenge, trilateral exercises are often assumed to have factored in China, even though it is never explicitly mentioned in the three countries’ statements.<sup>14</sup> The interception of a U.S. B-52 bomber by a Chinese J-11 fighter over the South China Sea just two days after the first trilateral aerial exercise, coupled with ongoing criticism of the trilateral partnership, implies that Beijing is acutely aware of these joint activities. As Beijing grows increasingly vigilant about the trilateral partnership, it is applying more pressure on South Korea.<sup>15</sup>

### *The Future of Trilateral Exercise during the Second Trump Presidency*

The messages from the joint exercises underscore the strengthening ROK-U.S.-Japan partnership in collaboratively addressing shared security challenges, while simultaneously revealing nuanced divergences in the three states’ stances and approaches. Differing messages do not necessarily indicate serious flaws or a crisis within the partnership—such differences

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<sup>13</sup> White House, *National Security Strategy*, 11–12.

<sup>14</sup> See Wang Qi, “U.S., Japan, S. Korea Boosting Military Tie-Up ‘Destructive to Regional Peace,’” *Global Times*, August 14, 2023 ~ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202308/1296275.shtml>.

<sup>15</sup> “Institutionalized U.S.-Japan-S. Korea Military Cooperation a Dangerous Sign,” *Global Times*, November 13, 2023 ~ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202311/1301759.shtml>.

are typical in any coalition. However, if they become more pronounced or conflict with each other, they could make joint messages less convincing and effective. Furthermore, given the vulnerabilities inherent in the partnership, these gaps could cause a rift, weakening the ties between the three countries.

Hence, better-coordinated messaging will be essential for future trilateral exercises. Exercise Freedom Edge made a notable step forward by delivering a uniform message from all three parties. Moving forward, refining coordinated messaging that integrates both the North Korean threat and challenges to a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific holds considerable potential. These challenges are shared by all three parties, and as global security dynamics shift, tackling the North Korean threat reinforces the broader effort to uphold a rules-based order, and vice versa. North Korea's deepening engagement in Russia's war in Ukraine particularly highlights this interconnectedness.

Further progress in this regard will depend on the political will of the three nations; nonetheless, the path forward remains uncertain. While the sharp focus of Donald Trump and his circle on the Indo-Pacific and taking a tough stance toward China suggests continuity in the strategic value of the trilateral partnership, uncertainties persist regarding the new administration's priorities and agenda, which will inevitably shape future messages emerging from joint exercises. Trump previously leveraged joint exercises for political negotiations, as evidenced by his decision in 2018 to suspend exercises on the Korean Peninsula during nuclear talks with Pyongyang. Building on this precedent, the new administration might choose to treat joint exercises as a bargaining tool to strengthen Washington's leverage in the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, there is a possibility that the Trump administration might place excessive emphasis on countering China through trilateral exercises.

Yoon's impeachment on December 14, 2024, has created additional uncertainties. At the time of writing, the survival of the Yoon administration is precarious, raising the possibility of a liberal government coming to power before the originally scheduled presidential election in 2027. The opposition Democratic Party (DP) leader Lee Jae-myung's rhetoric against trilateral exercises—which he has condemned as “an extreme pro-Japanese act” and “a defense disaster”—suggests that Seoul could scale back or withdraw

from such exercises should the DP come into power.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, a liberal government would be likely to overhaul Yoon's stance on trilateral ties, taking a more reserved approach to Washington's Indo-Pacific bid in the name of "balanced diplomacy," while also pursuing more conciliatory policies toward Pyongyang. This possibility gains further weight in light of the DP's criticism of Yoon's "anti-China, pro-Japan" policies, cited as a primary justification for the initial impeachment bill.

Under the new leadership of Shigeru Ishiba, Japan has demonstrated a relatively consistent commitment to endorsing the trilateral partnership, aligning with its vision of a "free and open Indo-Pacific." However, it is unlikely that Ishiba, who is leading a minority government with a weak base of support within his party and limited public approval, will take decisive steps to bridge the widening gaps and sustain the momentum of trilateral cooperation. Amid this uncertain backdrop, any changes to posture or cooperation made without thorough coordination could send unintended signals within the trilateral partnership and, more critically, to the international community, inevitably undermining the three countries' interests and security. ◆

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<sup>16</sup> Minji Lee, "Opposition Leader Denounces Trilateral Naval Drills as 'Pro-Japanese,'" Yonhap, October 7, 2022 ~ <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20221007006900315>.

## The Second Trump Administration and the U.S. Indo-Pacific Military Alliance System

*Jessica Taylor*

President Donald Trump's return to the White House has been met with concern that he will move to weaken or dismantle the U.S. Indo-Pacific military treaty alliance system. Some observers point to the often tense relationships of the first Trump administration with U.S. Indo-Pacific allies over alliance management issues, such as cost sharing and developing a consolidated approach to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) and the People's Republic of China (PRC).<sup>1</sup> While Trump is likely to continue to press allies to contribute more, his second administration is unlikely to move to weaken or dismantle the Indo-Pacific alliance system. Instead, due to the deteriorating security environment in Northeast Asia, this essay argues that the Trump administration will likely focus on strengthening the system and its military posture.

### *The Regional Security Environment*

The region's security environment significantly deteriorated toward the end of the first Trump administration and has worsened since then. Of chief U.S. concern is the managing of the strategic competition with the PRC and upholding the international rules-based order. Among other destabilizing behaviors, the PRC has increased belligerent activities toward U.S. partner Taiwan and U.S. treaty ally the Philippines, posing monumental risks to global trade and thereby U.S. interests.<sup>2</sup> Combined with the PRC's opaque military modernization and nuclear buildup, the second Trump

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**NOTE:** The views represented herein are the personal views of the author and not necessarily those of the U.S. government.

<sup>1</sup> Chad de Guzman, "How Asia Is Bracing for Trump's Second Term," *Time*, November 8, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> "Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea," Council on Foreign Relations, Center for Preventative Action, September 17, 2024 ~ <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/territorial-disputes-south-china-sea>.

administration is likely to find PRC aggression particularly troubling and move to strengthen its Indo-Pacific alliance system in response.<sup>3</sup>

Increasingly concerning is the concurrent deterioration of the security environment on the Korean Peninsula, adding fuel to the fire for the Trump administration to bolster the alliance system.<sup>4</sup> Irrespective of which political party is in office in the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea), inter-Korean relations will likely remain on edge for the foreseeable future. And despite the administration's efforts to rein in the DPRK's missile and nuclear programs during Trump's first term, the DPRK has continued modernizing its missiles, building up its nuclear program, and seeking the capability to credibly deliver a nuclear warhead to the U.S. mainland.<sup>5</sup> Severely complicating matters is Russia's increase in military exercises with the PRC and strengthening of its military alliance with the DPRK.<sup>6</sup> Both dynamics increase the probability that Russia would support the DPRK or the PRC during a conflict with the United States.

As a result, the intensifying simultaneous threats in the region mandate the United States to remain prepared militarily to confront multiple nuclear weapon-capable states on several fronts concurrently. Given these dynamics, it is likely that the second Trump administration will seek to build on the efforts of the Biden administration to strengthen the Indo-Pacific alliance system.

### *Protecting the Readiness of the Alliance System*

The Biden administration moved to improve the military readiness of the alliance system by revamping military exercises and furthering efforts to evolve the system beyond its traditional siloed hub-and-spoke architecture.<sup>7</sup> To this end, it institutionalized inter-alliance security cooperation, such

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<sup>3</sup> Noah Robertson, "China Leading 'Rapid Expansion' of Nuclear Arsenal, Pentagon Says," *Defense News*, October 24, 2024 ~ <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2024/10/24/china-leading-rapid-expansion-of-nuclear-arsenal-pentagon-says>.

<sup>4</sup> Joel Guinto and Juna Moon, "Drones, Threats and Explosions: Why Korean Tensions Are Rising," *BBC*, October 15, 2024 ~ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvgw8vq2xxyo>.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Roth, "North Korea Tells UN It Is Speeding Up Nuclear Weapons Programme," *Guardian*, November 4, 2024 ~ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/nov/04/north-korea-tells-un-it-is-speeding-up-nuclear-weapons-programme>.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher S. Chivvis and Jack Keating, "Cooperation between China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia: Current and Potential Future Threats to America," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 8, 2024 ~ <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/10/cooperation-between-china-iran-north-korea-and-russia-current-and-potential-future-threats-to-america>.

<sup>7</sup> Jake Sullivan, "2021 Lowy Lecture Jake Sullivan," *Lowy Institute*, September 11, 2021 ~ <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/2021-lowy-lecture-jake-sullivan>.

as through the revitalization of U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral cooperation and the creation of U.S.-Japan-Philippine trilateral cooperation, greatly strengthening the alliance system's ability to prepare for the emerging threat environment.<sup>8</sup> But much work remains to be done.

The prospect of simultaneous PRC and DPRK aggression with Russian military support further complicates U.S. military preparedness for conflict in the region. The Trump administration will need to address what is often referred to as “the tyranny of distance” when considering planning for a full-scale regional armed conflict.<sup>9</sup> The vast distance of Asia from U.S. shores mandates that the United States rely on its allies' support for U.S. military operations by way of access, basing, and overflight (ABO) and other logistical support during a large-scale regional conflict.<sup>10</sup> Washington also may need to request to deploy U.S. forces stationed in one ally to support another regional ally. To date, it is still unclear whether the United States would be able to do so. For instance, in the ROK-U.S. alliance, it was agreed under previous administrations that the United States could have strategic flexibility to deploy its forces to other conflicts in the region, but it would need to seek the ROK's permission first.<sup>11</sup> This, in concert with the lack of inter-alliance ABO and logistical support agreements, illustrates that allies might be hesitant to support the United States in coming to the defense of another U.S. ally. All in all, that the United States would have the inter-alliance cooperation it needs to fight a conflict in the region is not a forgone conclusion.

Another area that could influence the incoming Trump administration is the increasing tensions across the Taiwan Strait. To date, it is unclear whether the second Trump administration will reaffirm President Joe Biden's pledge to come to the defense of Taiwan in the event of PRC

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<sup>8</sup> “The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States,” White House, August 18, 2023 [~ https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/the-spirit-of-camp-david-joint-statement-of-japan-the-republic-of-korea-and-the-united-states](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/the-spirit-of-camp-david-joint-statement-of-japan-the-republic-of-korea-and-the-united-states); and “The Inaugural United States-Japan-Philippines Trilateral Maritime Dialogue,” U.S. Department of State, December 10, 2024 [~ https://www.state.gov/the-inaugural-united-states-japan-philippines-trilateral-maritime-dialogue](https://www.state.gov/the-inaugural-united-states-japan-philippines-trilateral-maritime-dialogue).

<sup>9</sup> Maximillian K. Bremer and Kelly A. Grieco, “The Four Tyrannies of Logistical Deterrence,” Stimson Center, November 8, 2023 [~ https://www.stimson.org/2023/the-four-tyrannies-of-logistical-deterrence](https://www.stimson.org/2023/the-four-tyrannies-of-logistical-deterrence).

<sup>10</sup> Renanah M. Joyce and Brian Blankenship, “Access Denied? The Future of U.S. Basing in a Contested World,” War on the Rocks, February 1, 2021 [~ https://warontherocks.com/2021/02/access-denied-the-future-of-u-s-basing-in-a-contested-world](https://warontherocks.com/2021/02/access-denied-the-future-of-u-s-basing-in-a-contested-world).

<sup>11</sup> “United States and the Republic of Korea Launch Strategic Consultation for Allied Partnership,” U.S. Department of State, Media Note, January 19, 2006 [~ https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/59447.htm](https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/59447.htm).

aggression.<sup>12</sup> It is also uncertain whether U.S. allies would be willing to provide support in a cross-strait conflict, being concerned that they might draw the PRC's ire or compromise their own readiness.

These dilemmas have at times sparked calls for a U.S.-led "Asian NATO," whereby an attack on one U.S. ally would mean an attack on all. A singular alliance framework would provide a forum to debate intervention in conflicts outside of the alliance, such as the defense of Taiwan. However, there are no indicators to date that Washington seeks an Asian NATO.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, observers note that regional governments' shifts in approaches to the alliance system, such as an expected transition in Seoul amid President Yoon Suk Yeol's impeachment, could derail efforts to devise a more cohesive alliance system.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the Trump administration will likely look to opportunities to strengthen the cooperation and military readiness of the U.S. Indo-Pacific alliance system below the threshold of forming a singular alliance.

### Conclusion

To this end, the incoming Trump administration should bolster deterrence by strengthening the credibility of U.S. security guarantees and working closely with allies within the U.S. Indo-Pacific alliance system. Doing so will require efforts such as cementing inter-alliance ABO and logistical support. Simultaneously, the U.S. administration should remain cognizant that allies who move to strengthen the alliance system's deterrence value do so at possible risks to their national security. U.S. Indo-Pacific allies stand at the front lines of China's economic coercion and have already been victims of such policies following efforts to improve the alliance system's military posture.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the second Trump administration must act in concert with U.S. allies to strengthen the alliance system while seeking avenues to safeguard the allies who take such risks. ◆

<sup>12</sup> David Brunnstrom and Trevor Hunnicutt, "Biden Says U.S. Forces Would Defend Taiwan in the Event of a Chinese Invasion," Reuters, September 18, 2022 ~ <https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-says-us-forces-would-defend-taiwan-event-chinese-invasion-2022-09-18>.

<sup>13</sup> Tangentially, Philippine foreign minister Enrique Manalo also noted that significant divergences in military cooperation approaches to the region remain that would prevent the formation of an Asian NATO. See "A Special Conversation with Enrique Manalo, Secretary of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines," Asia Society, September 22, 2023 ~ <https://asiasociety.org/video/special-conversation-enrique-manalo-secretary-foreign-affairs-philippines>.

<sup>14</sup> Seo Ji-Eun, "The Future of 3-Way Security Cooperation Cloudy Following Impeachment," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, December 16, 2024 ~ <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2024-12-16/national/diplomacy/The-future-of-3way-security-cooperation-cloudy-following-impeachment/2201924>.

<sup>15</sup> Darren J. Lim and Victor Ferguson, "Chinese Economic Coercion during the THAAD Dispute," Asan Institute for Policy Studies, Asan Forum, December 28, 2019 ~ <https://theasanforum.org/chinese-economic-coercion-during-the-thaad-dispute>.



## Command and Control: Cooperation and Sovereignty in U.S.-ROK-Japan Relations

*Sayo Saruta*

The Japanese Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) and the U.S. armed forces are upgrading their command-and-control coordination, with the JSDF and U.S. Forces Japan increasing their integration.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, in the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea), where the United States holds operational control of the ROK Armed Forces during military contingencies, the return of operational command to the ROK military has been a major political issue. Given the divergence on this issue in the two countries' relationships with the United States, this essay examines the history and current status of U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK command-and-control integration and the new trilateral defense cooperation between Japan, the United States, and the ROK.

### *History of Command Authority of the JSDF and the ROK Armed Forces*

The United States demanded command over Japan's armed forces even before the JSDF were established. The draft of the Security Cooperation Agreement the United States submitted in 1951 stated that in the event of contingencies, Japan's military forces would be under the unified command of the United States, but Tokyo rejected the explicit wording because it would both eliminate the equal relationship between Japan and the United States and raise constitutional issues.<sup>2</sup> However, a U.S. official document shows that Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida informed Washington that "in an emergency, a single commander was essential" and that "under current conditions, he should be designated by

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<sup>1</sup> "United States–Japan Joint Leaders' Statement," White House, April 10, 2024 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/04/10/united-states-japan-joint-leaders-statement>.

<sup>2</sup> Yasushi Suenami, "Nichi-Bei shikiken mitsuyaku" no kenkyu: Jieitai wa naze, kaigai e haheisareru no ka [Research on the "Secret Japan-U.S. Command Agreement": Why Is the Self-Defense Force Sent Overseas?] (Osaka: Soogensha, 2017), 150.

the U.S.”<sup>3</sup> Since this document (the so-called Command Authority Secret Pact) was found in the U.S. National Security Archive in the 1980s, it has become understood in Japan that the United States would have command authority over the JSDF during contingencies.<sup>4</sup>

When the administrative agreement based on the secret pact came into effect in 1952, although the pact itself was not revealed, it aroused public criticism, and Prime Minister Yoshida was forced to explain his position.<sup>5</sup> Yasushi Suenami, an expert on the secret pact, wrote that, since then, year by year “a system has been established for the U.S. to control the SDF’s equipment, training, and chain of command from peacetime,” including the U.S.-Japan Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement in 1954.<sup>6</sup> Over the years, defense cooperation has gradually and steadily increased. To deepen cooperation and coordination, the Japan-U.S. Bilateral Coordination Center was established by the 1997 Defense Cooperation Guidelines, and the Alliance Coordination Mechanism was stipulated in the 2015 Defense Cooperation Guidelines.<sup>7</sup>

In South Korea, on the other hand, the return of operational control from the U.S. military has been a contentious issue for many years. The commander of the U.S. Forces Korea, who is also the commander of the ROK/U.S. Combined Forces, holds operational control over the ROK military. When the UN Forces intervened in the Korean War in 1950, President Syngman Rhee transferred command of the ROK military to the American UN Forces commander, General Douglas MacArthur. After the armistice agreement in 1953, the ROK/U.S. Combined Forces Command was established, and command of the ROK Armed Forces was transferred to this command, where the commander is an American.

As time passed, calls grew for the return of operational command to South Korea in the interest of sovereignty. In 1994 the U.S. military returned operational command during peacetime to the ROK, but it still maintains command authority during contingencies. Although Seoul and Washington

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<sup>3</sup> Mark W. Clark, top secret memo to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, July 26, 1952, photo available at Kazuhiro Haraguchi (@kharaguchi), “[Shiki-ken mitsuyaku] kimitsu kaijo sa reta koden” [[Command Agreement] Declassified Diplomatic Cables], X, April 8, 2024 ~ <https://x.com/kharaguchi/status/1777413068856934809>.

<sup>4</sup> Suenami, “*Nichi-Bei shikiken mitsuyaku*” no kenkyu, 162.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 184–85.

<sup>7</sup> “The Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation,” Ministry of Defense (Japan), September 23, 1997 ~ [https://warp.da.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/11591426/www.mod.go.jp/e/d\\_act/us/ampo/pdf/19970923.pdf](https://warp.da.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/11591426/www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/us/ampo/pdf/19970923.pdf); and “The Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), April 27, 2015 ~ <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000078188.pdf>.

reached an agreement to return full command, the transfer has been postponed due to deteriorating conditions on the Korean Peninsula and the need for time to create a conducive environment, including by strengthening South Korea's operational and defense capabilities.<sup>8</sup> Negotiations over when full operational control will be returned are still ongoing.<sup>9</sup>

### *Recent Changes in Command and Control*

In recent years, Japan and the United States have been upgrading their frameworks of command and control at a rapid pace. A joint statement in April 2024 declared that “we announce our intention to bilaterally upgrade our respective command and control frameworks to enable seamless integration of operations and capabilities and allow for greater interoperability and planning between U.S. and Japanese forces in peacetime and during contingencies.”<sup>10</sup> The Japanese government plans to establish the JSDF Joint Operations Command (JJOC) by March 2025 to unify Japanese command of the Ground, Maritime, and Air Self-Defense Forces.<sup>11</sup> For its part, the United States announced its intention to reconstitute U.S. Forces Japan and create a joint force headquarters in Japan as a counterpart to the JJOC.<sup>12</sup>

Trilateral cooperation between Japan, the United States, and the ROK has been also developing rapidly. At the Camp David Summit in August 2023, the three parties decided to hold annual joint multidomain military exercises, which have already been put into practice with Exercise Freedom Edge in June and November 2024. Although currently strategies for the three countries' operations regarding North Korea are carried out under

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<sup>8</sup> Asaki Asami, “Yoon Suk Yeol seiken to senji sakusentouseiken no ikanmondai” [Yoon Suk Yeol Administration and the Issue of Wartime Operational Control Rights Transfer], National Institute for Defense Studies (Japan), NIDS Commentary 260, May 18, 2023 ~ <https://www.nids.mod.go.jp/publication/commentary/pdf/commentary260.pdf>; and Hideya Kurata, “Beikan yokushitaisei no saichosei—‘Senji’ sakusentouseiken saienki no koyo” [Realignment of U.S.-ROK Deterrence Posture—the Benefits of Rescheduling the Return of “Wartime” Operational Control], in *Chosen Hanto no sinario puran-ningu* [Scenario Planning for the Korean Peninsula] (Tokyo: Japan Institute of International Affairs, 2013), chap. 8 ~ [https://www2.jiia.or.jp/pdf/resarch/H26\\_Korean\\_Peninsula/08-kurata.pdf](https://www2.jiia.or.jp/pdf/resarch/H26_Korean_Peninsula/08-kurata.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> “Senjisakusentouseiken no henkanmondai ni taisuru rikai” [Understanding the Issue of the Return of Wartime Operational Control Rights], Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Japan, September 4, 2006 ~ [https://overseas.mofa.go.kr/jp-ja/brd/m\\_1055/view.do?seq=740061](https://overseas.mofa.go.kr/jp-ja/brd/m_1055/view.do?seq=740061).

<sup>10</sup> “United States–Japan Joint Leaders’ Statement.”

<sup>11</sup> Minoru Kihara, “Press Conference by Defense Minister Kihara on Friday, May 10, 2024, at 9:00 AM,” Ministry of Defense (Japan), May 10, 2024 ~ <https://www.mod.go.jp/en/article/2024/05/03da55da37e6a190bd2f465be44357c846fd6188.html>.

<sup>12</sup> “Joint Statement of the Security Consultative Committee (‘2+2’),” U.S. Department of Defense, July 28, 2024 ~ <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3852169/joint-statement-of-the-security-consultative-committee-22>.

separate command systems,<sup>13</sup> based on the joint announcement from the Japan-U.S. Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting (2+2) in January 2023, there is a possibility that closer coordination between the JJOC and the ROK/U.S. Combined Forces Command could become a point of discussion in the future. All three partners also agreed to operationalize real-time sharing of missile-warning data and pursue enhanced ballistic missile defense cooperation to counter North Korean nuclear and missile threats.<sup>14</sup>

### *Cooperation, Sovereignty, and Coordination*

When considering military efficiency and effectiveness, a unified command over all units taking action together is preferable. However, sovereignty matters, too. The ROK has been seeking the return of operational control to increase its national sovereignty.

The sovereignty issue is also being debated in Japan. Under its constitution, Japan is committed to the principle of using military force exclusively for self-defense and has maintained a restrained defense capability. JSDF capabilities have been deliberately designed in such a way that it is not possible to achieve efficient cooperation with the U.S. forces. Some experts have pointed out that if the “upgrading” of command-and-control frameworks between Japan and the United States continues, there is a risk that the principle of reserving military force for self-defense will collapse. Even if formally independent command-and-control structures are established between Japan and the United States, in the words of Kelly Grieco, “in an alliance relationship, the country with the stronger military force generally takes the leadership position.”<sup>15</sup> This implies that the influence of U.S. forces on the JSDF would increase. Since the United States has far more troops, resources, and information capabilities, there are concerns that the JSDF could end up simply following the decisions of the U.S. military.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Kiyofumi Iwata et al., *Jieitai saikokanbu ga kataru Reiwa no kokubo* [Self-Defense Forces Top Executives Speak Out about National Defense in Reiwa Era] (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 2021), 120–23.

<sup>14</sup> “The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States,” White House, August 18, 2023 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/the-spirit-of-camp-david-joint-statement-of-japan-the-republic-of-korea-and-the-united-states>.

<sup>15</sup> Kelly A. Grieco, “Shiki tosei nichibei de zure, senmonka ‘shirei-bu doshi renkei wo” [Command and Control Gap between Japan and the U.S. Expert: “Coordination between Commands”], interview with Akiyama Shinichi, *Mainichi*, June 26, 2024 ~ <https://mainichi.jp/articles/20240626/ddm/002/030/122000c>.

<sup>16</sup> Yujin Fuse, *Juzoku no daisho, NichiBei ittaika no shinjitsu* [The Price of Subservience: The Truth about U.S.-Japan Military Integration] (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2024), 2024.

In response to these criticisms in the Diet, former prime minister Fumio Kishida emphasized Japan's independence in terms of command authority, stating that "the Prime Minister commands the Self-Defense Forces as the supreme commander."<sup>17</sup> In an interview this author conducted, a former JSDF commander said, "When it comes to multinational forces, we all understand that each country has its own unique circumstances." This person went on to say that the JSDF and the U.S. Forces Japan are "deeply integrated at all levels including each individual department and each mission," but "ultimately, it is crucial that the politicians are able to refuse the U.S. when necessary."<sup>18</sup>

Close coordination and communication among Japan, the United States, and the ROK in any regional contingency would be essential. When Japan announced its intention to acquire a counterstrike capability, the ROK government expressed the view that prior consultation and consent with South Korea would be necessary in cases where the security of the Korean Peninsula would be affected.<sup>19</sup> As the scope of each country's defense strategy expands, conflicts of interest between countries are likely to arise, and it is possible that Japan will receive more demands for coordination from the United States, the ROK, and other countries in the future.

Lastly, what will be the impact of the second Trump administration on trilateral security cooperation? From the perspective of deterring China, the new administration will likely continue to promote Japan-U.S. and Japan-U.S.-ROK military cooperation. However, it is also highly likely that Washington will increase its demands for Tokyo and Seoul to take on a greater financial burden and play a greater role in the alliances. Questions of which U.S. demands Japan and the ROK will accept or reject will be major issues for diplomacy and domestic politics. Additionally, a new ROK administration, possibly a progressive one, in the aftermath of the impeachment of President Yoon Suk Yeol in December 2024 could alter the prospects for trilateral cooperation.

The interests of each of the three countries do not necessarily align all the time. With tensions growing in East Asia, the Japan-U.S.-ROK relationship requires careful day-to-day coordination between all three

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<sup>17</sup> Fumio Kishida (statement at the House of Councillors, 213th National Diet, Tokyo, April 19, 2024)   
 ~ <https://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/simple/detail?minId=121315254X01320240419>.

<sup>18</sup> Author's interview with a former JSDF commander, November 13, 2024.

<sup>19</sup> "Kankoku gaimusho, 'hangeki nouryoku ikinaino heiwa to ante ni kiyo wo'" [ROK Foreign Ministry, Counterattack Capability "Should Contribute to Peace and Stability in the Region"], *Nikkei*, December 16, 2022 ~ <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZQOGM16D2M0W2A211C2000000>.

parties, as well as clear communication about what roles each country can and cannot play. Furthermore, it is important that each country retains the ability to make decisions based on its own national interests in critical situations. Only with these mechanisms and understandings in place can smooth and effective multilateral cooperation be fully realized. ◆

## Conventional-Nuclear Coordination as a Way Forward for U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateral Security Cooperation

*Bee Yun Jo*

While the Camp David Summit in August 2023 was a watershed moment for the trilateral partnership among the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea), the United States, and Japan, the return of Donald Trump and his “naked transactionalism”<sup>1</sup> to the U.S. presidency are seen by many to pose new uncertainties for the partnership’s continuity. Three key questions as his second administration begins are (1) whether reliance on U.S. allies will become more bilaterally focused versus trilateral, (2) to what extent the administration will coerce U.S. allies to increase burden sharing and pay more for the presence of U.S. troops, and (3) to what extent Trump will make the trilateral partnership “be about China.”<sup>2</sup> While the vigor of trilateral cooperation will depend in part on how the Trump administration unfolds in these areas, this essay anticipates some room for cooperation and continuity in the ROK-U.S.-Japan partnership. Based on how deterrence works in the partnership, this essay argues that trilateral security cooperation can benefit all three countries under Trump 2.0. The essay concludes with a proposal for a concept of conventional-nuclear coordination (CNC) for fostering trilateral security cooperation.

### *Deterrence and the Trilateral Partnership*

Having to convince an aggressor that a state will defend and fight for survival of a third party—i.e., extended deterrence—is never an easy task.<sup>3</sup> Michael Mazarr described succinctly that while an aggressor may be always certain that a target state will defend itself and fight for its survival, this is less

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<sup>1</sup> Peter D. Feaver, “How Trump Will Change the World,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 6, 2024 ~ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/how-trump-will-change-world>.

<sup>2</sup> Clint Work, “Under Trump the U.S.-ROK Alliance Will Increasingly Be About China,” Korea Economic Institute of America, November 25, 2024 ~ <https://keia.org/the-peninsula/under-trump-the-us-rok-alliance-will-increasingly-be-about-china>.

<sup>3</sup> Bee Yun Jo, “Conventional-Nuclear Integration (CNI) as Alliance Practice for Extended Deterrence and Assurance,” *Journal of Peace and Unification* 14, no. 1 (2024): 117.

so if sacrifices are involved for survival of another state.<sup>4</sup> Thomas Schelling wrote that while threats are “inherently credible, even if unspoken,” in deterrence, threats “must be made credible” in extended deterrence.<sup>5</sup>

While extended deterrence itself is complicated business for allies, ROK-U.S.-Japan security cooperation is even trickier as the ROK-Japan leg of the tripartite remains only a “quasi-alliance.”<sup>6</sup> Built on traditional hub-and-spoke U.S. alliances with the ROK and Japan, respectively, trilateral security cooperation has traditionally remained supplementary to bilateral security commitments in convincing aggressors that military action toward any of these three states will incur more costs than benefits. Troubled ROK-Japan relations over historic animosities, as well as divergence in threat priorities over the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) versus China, have often chipped away the deterrence value of trilateral security cooperation. Reduced at times over the years to a means of alliance management for Washington and crisis management for Seoul and Tokyo, the prospect of trilateral partnership especially suffered when ROK-Japan relations reached a nadir in the late 2010s.

Indeed, for deterrence to work, we need what I call the “4Cs”—capabilities, credibility, communication, and continuity.<sup>7</sup> To be able to reduce an adversary’s perception of benefits from an attack, a state needs sufficient capabilities to signal its ability to deny and retaliate. Yet, capabilities alone do not suffice, as the state’s resolve also needs to be credible enough to deter the adversary. Thus, communication of what forces it will employ and how it will employ these forces is critical. Last, continuity is needed—as observation of U.S. alliance commitments reveals, continuity matters in keeping U.S. security commitments credible to both adversaries and allies. In the context of ROK-U.S.-Japan security cooperation, attaining the 4Cs is not easy for the reasons outlined above.

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<sup>4</sup> Michael J. Mazarr, “Understanding Deterrence,” RAND Corporation, Perspective, 2018, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 36.

<sup>6</sup> Victor D. Cha, *Alignment Despite Antagonism: The United States–Korea–Japan Security Triangle* (New York: Columbia University, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> These are often described as the “3Cs”—capabilities, credibility, and communication. I have added continuity to this list. See Nam Hoon Cho et al., *Haekeokjejeonryakui sidaejeok byeonhwa banghyanggwa Hanbando Jeokyong* [New Era of Nuclear Deterrence Strategy and Implications to the Korean Peninsula] (Seoul: Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, 2018).



*A Progress Report and the Prospects of Trilateral Deterrence*

Despite the stated challenges, however, there are at least three areas of active endeavors since the 2023 Camp David Summit to enhance the deterrence value of trilateral security cooperation. The first is in the realms of declaratory policy and alignment of threat perceptions. Most notably, the Camp David accords included newly coordinated language of trilateral resolve on the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea—that the three partners are committed in opposing “any unilateral attempts to change the status-quo” of the Indo-Pacific, including in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait.<sup>8</sup> This is a significant departure from their previous joint declarations, which refrained from any references involving China.<sup>9</sup> Fear of entrapment and veering strategic priorities between the DPRK and China had previously prevented concerted statements on Taiwan or the South China Sea from being included.

The second area is institutionalization. Since the Camp David Summit, the three partners have for the first time agreed on their “commitment to consult.” They have expanded their consultative mechanisms horizontally and vertically, encompassing new fields of consultation such as space and cyber, as well as establishing multiple levels of dialogue from the working-group to the summit level. Most distinctively, the three states also agreed to establish a permanent Trilateral Secretariat for Cooperation in November 2024.

The third area is operationalization. Since the Camp David Summit, the three countries have strived to make progress in dealing with the DPRK’s continued nuclear and missile threats as well as in new areas of cyber and space threats. For example, they launched their first trilateral multidomain exercise, Freedom Edge, and committed to sharing real-time DPRK missile-warning data, among others.

All in all, through better coordination of threat perceptions, institutionalization, and operationalization, trilateral security cooperation seeks not only to provide deterrence against the DPRK’s nuclear and missile

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<sup>8</sup> “The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States,” White House, August 18, 2023 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/the-spirit-of-camp-david-joint-statement-of-japan-the-republic-of-korea-and-the-united-states/>; and “Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States,” White House, November 15, 2024 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/11/15/joint-statement-of-japan-the-republic-of-korea-and-the-united-states>.

<sup>9</sup> The discrepancy is also clear from trilateral defense ministerial meetings that were held in 2017 and 2024.

threats but also to respond to the emerging “axis of autocracies” of Russia, China, and the DPRK.<sup>10</sup>

The remaining question is will it last. There are many reasons to expect headwinds in trilateral relations,<sup>11</sup> including Trump’s preferences for bilateralism and transactionalism. Nevertheless, new structural variables may push Trump to maintain the trilateral partnership. The first is troubled regional stability. As highlighted in the U.S. Department of Defense’s “491 report”—the U.S. nuclear employment planning guidance, released in November 2024—the United States now faces a security environment that requires it to be able to “deter Russia, the PRC, and the DPRK simultaneously in peacetime, crisis, and conflict.”<sup>12</sup> Aside from the urgency of a nuclear-peer environment in which the nuclear arsenal of one or more adversaries outmatches that of the United States, the unprecedented level of military cooperation between Russia and the DPRK and the potential ganging up of China, Russia, and the DPRK pose serious challenges to the United States in the Indo-Pacific. A second interrelated area is U.S.-China relations. The list of recently nominated personnel for President Trump’s second term signals that U.S.-China relations will not be peaceful. In such an external environment, conventional U.S. allies like the ROK and Japan in the Indo-Pacific will be strategic partners in maintaining the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence against multiple threats, while the United States restructures its nuclear and conventional forces.

From Seoul’s and Tokyo’s perspective, Trump’s insistence on taking sides and transactional attitudes are likely to push the domestic constituencies of allies, particularly Seoul, to again hedge through the idea of strategic flexibility between Washington and Beijing; furthermore, it is likely to elevate the nuclear debate in Seoul to another level. Yet, the “good news” for the trilateral partnership is that the security environment is too dire to implement strategic flexibility. For Seoul in particular, Pyongyang’s offensive nuclear doctrine and unprecedented buildup of nuclear weapons and missiles, as well as its new defense pact with Russia, significantly strain South Korea’s strategic choices. Also, all three leaders are faced with a limited term in office, which, with the shortened time frame, may lead them

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<sup>10</sup> James M. Lindsay, “Election 2024: How to Respond to the Axis of Autocracies,” Council on Foreign Relations, October 24, 2024 ~ <https://www.cfr.org/blog/election-2024-how-respond-axis-autocracies>.

<sup>11</sup> Shin Kak-soo (remarks at the 9th KF-CSIS ROK-U.S. Strategic Forum, Washington, D.C., November 19, 2024).

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, “Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States,” November 7, 2024, 2 ~ <https://media.defense.gov/2024/Nov/15/2003584623/-1/-1/1/report-on-the-nuclear-employment-strategy-of-the-united-states.pdf>.

to not prefer autonomous options. In sum, neither “America first” nor the desire for an autonomous or flexible strategy can be achieved in the given window of time these leaders have. This reality will likely push all three partners to opt for continuity in the trilateral partnership rather than a breakdown of it.

### *Ways Forward: Trilateral Conventional-Nuclear Coordination*

To fulfill the United States’ strategic priorities in an environment with multiple nuclear powers, as well as to meet South Korea’s and Japan’s priorities in deterring the DPRK and China, respectively, this essay proposes the concept of conventional-nuclear coordination—a term inspired by recent ROK-U.S. efforts in extended deterrence that could involve Japan as well.

Since the 2023 Washington Declaration and the establishment of the Nuclear Consultative Group, South Korea and the United States have focused on improving so-called conventional-nuclear integration (CNI) of their forces, including U.S. nuclear weapons.<sup>13</sup> Through the stated workstreams of the Nuclear Consultative Group—information sharing, consultation, joint planning and execution, and combined exercises and training—the two states have worked to better integrate the United States’ nuclear weapons use, planning, and operation with their conventional forces.<sup>14</sup> For South Korea, the main incentives in CNI are twofold. First, it enables the ROK to specify and expand its conventional role, by which it can seek to better lock in the United States’ security commitment to provide the “full range of U.S. capabilities including nuclear.”<sup>15</sup> Second, with specified conventional roles assigned, South Korea can seek enhancements in both software and hardware components of capabilities. Altogether, CNI is intended to assure the public and signal the two states’ credible resolve and capability to the DPRK.

CNI also benefits the United States in two ways. First, it presents opportunities to better integrate the ROK’s conventional forces in the Indo-Pacific region, leading to greater burden sharing. Second, it both assures the ally and sends signals of resolve to the adversary. These positive and negative signals are particularly important against the backdrop of ongoing wars elsewhere and the increasing potential for simultaneous

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<sup>13</sup> For more on CNI, see Jo, “Conventional-Nuclear Integration (CNI) as Alliance Practice.”

<sup>14</sup> “Joint Press Statement on Nuclear Consultative Group Meeting,” White House, December 16, 2023 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/12/16/joint-press-statement-on-nuclear-consultative-group-meeting>.

<sup>15</sup> “Washington Declaration,” White House, April 26, 2023 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/04/26/washington-declaration-2>.

conflicts, especially given the slow progress of nuclear modernization. Commitments to continued cooperation and transactionalism are both present at the heart of the concept.

If the concept of CNC is applied, with a focus on trilateral coordination, there are of course thorny issues concerning the level of integration between the ROK and Japan. Any sign of deeper military or alliance-like integration will likely wreak havoc in the ROK's domestic politics. Nonetheless, given the security environment, there are common interests among the three partners in improving CNC. While South Korea and Japan cannot be obliged to come to each other's aid in times of contingency, given continued historical animosities and the politicization of the relationship among domestic constituencies, better coordination of the three states' conventional forces and the United States' nuclear forces could enhance deterrence against regional contingencies, particularly during the likely period of transactionalism ahead under President Trump. For the ROK and Japan, for instance, better coordination with U.S. nuclear forces could be demanded in return for Trump's push for greater burden sharing in the region. Coordination of the ROK's and Japan's conventional roles in tandem will also help signal trilateral resolve in maintaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in the Indo-Pacific. From Trump's perspective, coordination enables the United States to focus on nuclear modernization and alliance management, including ROK-Japan relations, and, most importantly, can assure U.S. allies with minimum nuclear arsenal.

In implementing CNC, the trilateral partners should also engage in developing an institutional mechanism. Notably, the Office of Strategic Stability and Deterrence Affairs within the U.S. Department of State is in charge of both high-level extended deterrence dialogues with South Korea and Japan: the ROK-U.S. Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group and the Japan-U.S. Extended Deterrence Dialogue. Beginning with a foreign and defense ministerial 2+2 based on these two mechanisms, CNC can allow the three countries to better burden share, coordinate, and thereby enhance the overall credibility, capability, communication, and continuity of their trilateral partnership in deterrence against growing threats in the Indo-Pacific. ◆

## Trilateral U.S.-ROK-Japan Cooperation on Noncombatant Evacuation Operations

*Yurika Ishii*

Noncombatant evacuation operations (NEOs) are a critical component of contingency planning for a potential crisis on the Korean Peninsula. The aim of such operations is to ensure the safe and efficient evacuation of civilians, including foreign nationals, from areas of conflict or instability. Such operations on the peninsula would necessitate coordinated efforts among the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea), the United States, and Japan.

The three countries agreed to institutionalize a trilateral partnership in August 2023, and in July 2024 the defense leaders of each state signed the Memorandum of Cooperation on the Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework.<sup>1</sup> The agreement “institutionalizes trilateral security cooperation among defense authorities, including senior-level policy consultations, information sharing, trilateral exercises, and defense exchange cooperation, to contribute to peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, in the Indo-Pacific region, and beyond.”<sup>2</sup> Against the background is the increase of regional security threats, most notably Russia’s recent inking of the Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) and the DPRK’s contribution of arms and troops to Russia’s war on Ukraine.

A major challenge concerning NEOs is that the ROK has never agreed for Japan’s military, the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF), to enter its territory. Article 60(2) of the ROK’s constitution provides that “the National Assembly shall...have the right to consent to the declaration of war, the dispatch of armed forces to foreign states, or the stationing of alien forces in the territory of the Republic of Korea.” However, in October 2024 the ROK government published a policy determining that the administration does not need to seek the consent of the National Assembly to allow the JSDF

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<sup>1</sup> “Japan-United States-Republic of Korea Trilateral Ministerial Joint Press Statement,” U.S. Department of Defense, Press Release, July 27, 2024 ~ <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3852146/japan-united-states-republic-of-korea-trilateral-ministerial-joint-press-statem>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

access to the U.S. military bases on its territory.<sup>3</sup> This marks a significant shift in the ROK's regional security policy, as it suggests a willingness by the government to accommodate closer trilateral cooperation involving Japan should a crisis necessitate Japanese involvement in NEOs. Such cooperation has traditionally been constrained by historical tensions and domestic political considerations.

The implementation and sustainability of this new policy will likely depend on several factors, including the approach of the new U.S. administration toward alliance management and regional diplomacy. If the U.S. administration is supportive of robust trilateral coordination, it may be able to enhance the operational feasibility of such arrangements, whereas any perceived shifts in U.S. strategic priorities could complicate the delicate balance required to maintain this policy. With this in mind, this essay will in three sections examine the historical context for NEOs between the three states, the implications of the ROK's policy change, and ways forward under the new U.S. administration from January 2025.<sup>4</sup>

### *The Historical Context*

During the Korean War in the 1950s, U.S. forces deployed from Japanese bases to play a critical role in repelling North Korean forces north of the 38th parallel on the peninsula. This strategic interdependence has continued, with U.S. bases in Japan serving as vital logistical hubs for regional security operations. U.S. forces also remained in the ROK, serving alongside ROK forces.

The geopolitical landscape shifted significantly during the 1994 Korean Peninsula nuclear crisis, when North Korea's nuclear developments prompted the United States to enhance regional security measures. During this period, Washington requested extensive support from Tokyo, including assistance with NEOs. However, Japan lacked the enabling domestic legislation at the time to provide much effective assistance. In response to the situation, Japan and the United States strengthened their security cooperation. The 1996 Joint Declaration on Japan-U.S. Security expanded the scope of their defense collaboration to include contingencies in the Asia-Pacific region. This led to updates in the Guidelines for Japan-U.S.

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<sup>3</sup> "S. Korean Defense Ministry Claims Japanese Troops Can Temporarily Stay in Korea Without Legislative Approval," *Hankyoreh*, October 8, 2024 ~ [https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_international/1161594.html](https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/1161594.html).

<sup>4</sup> For further analysis of the historical context in section one, see Yurika Ishii, "Japanese Legal Challenges in Rescuing Nationals Abroad," *International Legal Studies* 100 (2023): 661.

Defense Cooperation in 1997 and again in 2015. These guidelines explicitly address NEOs, particularly in scenarios such as a Korean Peninsula crisis.

The 2015 guidelines clarify that each country is responsible for evacuating its own nationals while coordinating with local authorities. They emphasize mutual support, specifying that Japan and the United States will coordinate on evacuation plans, transportation, and safe havens. Joint mechanisms, such as NEO coordination groups and tabletop exercises, are integral to this framework. Despite these provisions, Japan's reliance on U.S. capabilities for conducting evacuations remains significant. Given the ROK's historical refusal to permit JSDF operations on its soil, Japan must depend on U.S. transportation assets to facilitate evacuations. This dynamic underscores the importance of U.S. leadership and logistical support in managing a crisis.

In October 2015, a Korean National Assembly debate highlighted this issue when Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn stated that allowing JSDF entry would only be considered if it served the ROK's national interest. Public backlash forced the government to clarify that JSDF operations in the ROK would generally not be permitted, and the prime minister later withdrew his statement.

Under Japan's SDF Act (Articles 84-3 and 84-4), the JSDF is authorized to conduct operations to protect and evacuate Japanese nationals during an "important influence" situation. However, these operations cannot extend into another state's territory or territorial seas without explicit permission. Thus, without ROK approval, the JSDF cannot enter the ROK to directly assist Japanese nationals. To address this gap, Japan has developed alternative measures. In 2017, the ROK agreed to allow Japanese nationals to use over nine hundred designated evacuation centers within the ROK, such as subway stations and churches. Japan has also made plans to rely on commercial and chartered aircraft to evacuate its citizens.

### *The Statement of the ROK Government in 2024*

Meanwhile, the ROK and the United States already conduct joint biannual NEO exercises to prepare for a crisis. Incorporating Japan more comprehensively into these efforts is essential to strengthen trilateral coordination. Information-sharing and peacetime planning are critical measures for an effective response, especially in the context of the Camp David Summit in August 2023. While the meeting reaffirmed a commitment

to enhanced trilateral security cooperation, it notably did not address specific policies for evacuating nationals abroad.

It was thus a major development that in October 2024 the ROK Ministry of National Defense clarified its position that parliamentary consent would not be required for JSDF aircraft to temporarily use U.S. military bases in the ROK to provide transport support. It determined that such operations do not fall under the category of stationing within ROK territory as stipulated in Article 60(2) of the constitution. This was the first time that the ministry had given a legal interpretation to the effect that decisions could be made based solely on the approval of the ROK cabinet. Although the conditions for the government to grant such permission have not been made public, and there seems to be strong domestic opposition, this change in position would allow the ROK and Japan to cooperate directly in the case of an NEO and other operations such as humanitarian aid and disaster relief.

### *Ways Forward*

The new U.S. administration and Congress taking office in January 2025 will not likely alter the foundations of ROK-Japan-U.S. trilateral cooperation for security matters. However, given the Trump administration's emphasis on burden sharing in security arrangements, it is plausible that the United States could press both Japan and the ROK to bear a greater share of the financial and logistical costs associated with NEOs. The July 2024 Memorandum of Cooperation on the Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework serves as a mechanism to reduce costs, increase efficiency, and ensure timely evacuation of civilians. The framework's long-term viability, however, will depend on the ability of the three nations to manage domestic political opposition and the sensitive historical issues that have hindered deeper Japan-ROK cooperation. Systemic coordination among Japan, the ROK, and the United States could mitigate the legal and operational limitations of the JSDF, especially in a Korean Peninsula crisis or an NEO. An explicit agreement between the three states on managing NEO situations in a contingency could better align the national policies of each state with the realities of the strategic environment. ◆