Forging a New Era of U.S.-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Cooperation

The Key to a Stable, Secure Indo-Pacific

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Executive Summary

In August 2023, the leaders of Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and the United States met for an unprecedented in-person summit at Camp David to expand and deepen trilateral relations. The meeting resulted in a comprehensive joint statement, “The Spirit of Camp David,” which commits the three nations to increasing the frequency of consultations between their leaders and senior diplomatic, economic, and security officials; raising the tempo and sophistication of their joint military exercises; taking new initiatives such as sharing sensitive missile warning data on North Korea in real time; collaborating on economic security measures and the protection of emerging technologies; and working together to stabilize global supply chains by launching a pilot early warning system. The Biden administration deserves credit for coordinating this watershed moment in trilateral relations, but South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida were responsible for the bilateral rapprochement that laid the foundation for renewed trilateral relations.

A major contributing factor to Japan and South Korea’s interest in improving defense ties with each other and trilaterally with the United States is the intensifying nuclear and missile threats from North Korea. Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo have laid out an ambitious defense cooperation agenda, including reviving trilateral maritime cooperation, initiating trilateral aerial cooperation for the first time, and bringing online a real-time trilateral data-sharing system for tracking North Korean missile launches.

The three countries are poised to expand their cooperation across a range of issues and within other minilateral and multilateral settings. This includes the United Nations (UN), where, as of January 2024, both Japan and South Korea serve as non-permanent members of the Security Council—an overlap with the United States, a permanent member, which has not taken place in 27 years. Japan and South Korea are already coordinating their diplomatic activities in response to the Israel-Hamas conflict in the Middle East, demonstrating the potential for trilateral collaboration outside the Indo-Pacific region.

Economic and technological competition with China also is driving the current push to cooperate trilaterally. Japan-ROK rapprochement has ended the trade dispute between Seoul and Tokyo, and the three partners are now deepening cooperation on economic security to secure supply chains for semiconductors, electric vehicle batteries, and critical minerals. President Yoon and Prime Minister Kishida have encouraged industry cooperation, and all three capitals are now in discussions to further cooperation in novel technology areas.

There is both opportunity and appetite to enhance trilateral cooperation across a range of critical technology areas, namely quantum, biotechnology, and cybersecurity. The three nations already have largely complementary national quantum technology strategies, and there are opportunities to align resources to further quantum information science and technology (QIST) research and development and to harness the technology’s economic potential together. All three countries...
are interested in strengthening their respective biotechnology sectors as well as addressing cybersecurity challenges, especially related to North Korea and its funding for nuclear and missile programs.

Despite the immediate prospects for strengthening trilateral cooperation, there are several obstacles to sustaining meaningful collaboration over the long term. A change in national leadership in Tokyo, Seoul, or Washington could halt the partnership, as it is closely tied to the personal foreign policy agendas of all three leaders. Likewise, institutionalizing trilateral cooperation, regardless of leadership change, will be challenging in the long run. The Indo-Pacific security environment is increasingly severe, and varying perceptions among the three nations of threats posed by China, Russia, and North Korea could lead to cracks in trilateral relations. Similarly, policymakers in all three capitals will need to carefully balance economic security with nationalist or protectionist trade policies to sustain support for trilateral economic and technology cooperation.

The large number of both opportunities and challenges facing the trilateral partnership means leaders in all three capitals have difficult decisions to make to sustain the momentum of the partnership. It is imperative for Japan, South Korea, and the United States to take the initiative and seize the low-hanging opportunities to further institutionalize and strengthen the ties with each other. In this context, U.S. policymakers should:

- **Continue to press for expanded trilateral cooperation within the UN.** Both Japan and South Korea are non-permanent members of the UN Security Council (UNSC) at the same time for the first time in 27 years. Using formal, multilateral forums such as the UNSC for trilateral cooperation can help reinforce progress made elsewhere and provides a dedicated means to align on issues the three parties have agreed to tackle together.

- **Create an interagency working group to identify opportunities and gaps in coordination among different minilateral groups, including the U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral, the Quad, the “Chip 4,” and the U.S.-Australia-Japan Trilateral Security Dialogue.** In addition to improving diplomatic efficiency, encouraging greater coordination among the various minilaterals can provide opportunities for Japan and South Korea to deepen their security relationships with like-minded partners, contributing to the development of a networked security architecture aligned with U.S. priorities.

- **Encourage trilateral cooperation beyond the Indo-Pacific.** Japan and South Korea have coordinated some diplomatic activities in response to the Israel-Hamas conflict. The United States should take advantage of this progress and encourage trilateral cooperation in other regional or functional areas of mutual interest, such as energy security in the Middle East or Russia’s war in Ukraine.

- **Increase trilateral intelligence sharing to enhance collective maritime domain awareness.** The three countries should begin strengthening intelligence sharing beyond the North Korean missile threat by strengthening cooperation on maritime intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.

- **Enhance trilateral contingency planning, especially evacuation of civilians.** All three countries have an incentive to work together in evacuating civilians in the event of a regional contingency involving Taiwan. Modernizing alliance command and control structures can further enhance trilateral contingency planning and interoperability.

- **Plan trilateral defense exercises that expand beyond traditional domains to include cyber and space.** China, Russia, and North Korea continue to invest in cyber and space capabilities. U.S. defense planners should consider trilateral exercises outside of traditional domains, such as joint space domain awareness or active cyber defense.

- **Encourage trilateral cooperation to further QIST research and development and harness the technology’s economic potential.** The three states already have largely complementary national quantum technology strategies and capabilities, with the United States leading in quantum sensing, Japan excelling in quantum communications, and South Korea advancing in the field of quantum computing.

- **Launch a trilateral biotech industry working group and begin negotiations on a trilateral biotechnology cooperation agreement.** The Biden administration should engage more robustly on emerging biotechnology with Japan and South Korea as a key area for strategic advancement.

- **Build consensus both at home and with trilateral counterparts to operationalize the trade pillar of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework.** This is critical to demonstrate the body’s strength—and by extension the United States’ strength as an organizing force—to a watchful China.
Introduction

The recent unprecedented trilateral cooperation between Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and the United States under the administrations of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, President Yoon Suk Yeol, and President Joe Biden is laying a foundation for the three countries to collectively address increasingly critical economic, political, and security challenges in the region. Following a watershed summit at Camp David in August 2023, the trilateral partnership has expanded beyond addressing just the traditional, shared threat posed by North Korea to cover broader security issues in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. At the summit, the leaders jointly announced their commitment to deepen cooperation and align efforts to promote peace and stability and a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region. Following the summit, from mid-August to early December 2023, the three nations met roughly 30 times—averaging nearly one meeting every four days—to operationalize their pledges of closer cooperation. These developments show promise for a new era in trilateral relations that could help address nuclear and missile threats from North Korea and contribute to deterrence, stability, and economic prosperity throughout the Indo-Pacific.

While the recent momentum in trilateral relations has the potential to fundamentally alter the economic and security landscape of the Indo-Pacific, questions about the political sustainability of the initiative have already emerged. A presidential election in the United States, a ruling party presidential election in Japan, and National Assembly elections in South Korea will occur in 2024, and there is concern that new leadership or shifts in political power dynamics in any of the three nations could lead to the deprioritizing of trilateral ties. Historical frictions in the Japan-ROK bilateral relationship also threaten to disrupt the initiative, especially in South Korea, where public support for improving relations with Japan lags behind Yoon’s personal commitment to moving them forward. The ambitious Camp David agenda will also take time and concerted effort to operationalize, and it could lose momentum and support if there are too many obstacles to its implementation. Finally, external security threats, such as Chinese economic coercion and maritime aggression or burgeoning Russia-North Korea defense and technology cooperation, could also reduce support for the initiative among the South Korean or Japanese public, causing either or both countries to back away from it.

This report examines recent developments driving trilateral relations between the United States, Japan, and South Korea, and assesses the opportunities and challenges facing the future of trilateral cooperation. It then offers policy recommendations for how decisionmakers in Tokyo, Seoul, and Washington can leverage the current momentum of the partnership to further institutionalize trilateral relations, strengthen the durability of the relationship, and build on the Camp David agenda to promote peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.
Progress in Japan–South Korea Ties Lays Foundation for Trilateral Cooperation

The year 2023 will be remembered as a watershed for trilateral ties between Tokyo, Seoul, and Washington. During the gathering of the three leaders at Camp David for their first-ever, stand-alone summit in August 2023, they issued a joint statement referred to as “The Spirit of Camp David,” which commits them to work together in new ways to strengthen security and economic prosperity in the region. The location of the summit at Camp David, where the famous Middle East peace agreement was signed 45 years ago, added symbolic resonance, signifying the diplomatic breakthrough the meeting represented. The leaders promised, among other things, to raise the tempo and sophistication of their joint military exercises, broaden regional partnerships with organizations such as the Association for Southeast Asian Nations, deepen economic and technology cooperation, and work together to stabilize global supply chains.

The Camp David summit would not have been possible without the recent progress between Tokyo and Seoul in improving their bilateral ties after decades of disagreement over how to address the legacy of Japan’s 35-year colonization of South Korea, from 1910 to 1945. In March 2022, President-elect Yoon immediately initiated diplomatic overtures with Prime Minister Kishida during their first phone call celebrating the former’s victory, with Yoon promising to build a “future-oriented” relationship between the two states. The same month, the two leaders spoke again to discuss avenues for future cooperation, including working to resolve issues “in a way that is reasonable and would be of mutual benefit,” apparently referring to the controversy over Japanese use of Korean forced labor during the Japanese colonization.

In March 2023, Kishida and Yoon met for an in-person summit to discuss closer cooperation—a first between leaders of the two nations in 12 years. They agreed to thaw relations and take steps to resume reciprocal visits, security dialogues, trade talks, and intelligence sharing. They also discussed cooperation on the North Korean threat as well as a solution to the Korean forced labor controversy based on a proposal by Yoon. Just before the summit took place, Yoon announced the establishment of a Korean foundation to pay victims who were subject to forced labor during the Japanese colonization of Korea. This was viewed as a significant concession to Japan, following two Korean Supreme Court rulings in 2018 demanding that Japanese companies that had used forced labor compensate directly the families of the Korean victims.

SOUTH KOREAN SUPREME COURT RULINGS ON FORCED LABOR

In 2018, South Korea’s top court issued two separate verdicts ordering Japan’s Nippon Steel and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries to compensate families of the victims of forced labor that occurred during Japanese colonial occupation. The government of Japan disagreed with the rulings, stating that the 1965 normalization treaty with South Korea had settled all wartime issues. Some Korean media outlets even floated the idea that Nippon Steel’s joint assets with Korean firm PNR could be seized to compensate the plaintiffs if the Japanese company did not comply with the ruling.

Tensions over the forced labor issue contributed to a downward spiral in the bilateral relationship. In July 2019, Japan placed export controls on key chemicals that South Korean companies need to manufacture semiconductors and electronic displays, citing “inadequate management” of the chemicals being exported to South Korean technology companies. A month later, Japan downgraded its trading relationship with South Korea. Seoul responded the following month by filing a World Trade Organization (WTO) complaint and downgrading Japan as a trading partner.

Once Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol took office, in May 2022, the two states began repairing trade relations and addressing the forced labor dispute. In March 2023, Yoon announced the establishment of a Korean foundation that would pay forced labor victims, rather than requiring Japanese companies to do so, as per the 2018 ruling of the Korean Supreme Court. Tokyo subsequently removed its export controls, and Seoul dropped its WTO complaint. South Korea restored Japan’s preferred trading partner status in April 2023, and in turn, Japan restored South Korea’s status that July.

Yoon hoped that his spring 2023 announcement to establish a Korean foundation to pay Korean forced labor victims would resolve the issue. However, in December 2023, South Korea’s Supreme Court upheld decisions by the lower courts dismissing the appeals of the two Japanese companies to overturn the 2018 verdicts. The court’s rationale for the ruling was based on a precedent set in one of the 2018 verdicts, which argued that the 1965 treaty could not prevent individuals from seeking compensation for forced labor, because the act is an “illegality against humanity.” In response to the December 2023 ruling, a spokesperson for the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the Korean government would attempt to provide compensation for the plaintiffs through the third-party foundation established by the Yoon administration.
While Yoon and Kishida deserve credit for their steps toward rapprochement, U.S. President Joe Biden has also consistently prioritized the partnership despite other U.S. priorities in Europe and the Middle East. Without Biden’s willingness to seize the momentum of Yoon and Kishida’s reset in bilateral relations by hosting the summit at Camp David, it is unlikely that there would have been the same level of progress in trilateral ties in subsequent months.

**The North Korean Threat Drives Defense Collaboration**

A major contributing factor to both Japan’s and South Korea’s interest in improving defense ties with each other and trilaterally with the United States is the intensifying nuclear and missile threats from North Korea. In 2022, North Korea conducted 69 missile tests—more than 11 times the number of tests it conducted in 2021. After several years of tense relations, Japan and South Korea have started normalizing defense and security ties, re-normalizing intelligence sharing through the bilateral General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) and coordinating trilateral military exercises with the United States. Leaders of the three militaries met at least three times in 2023, following what had been a four-year hiatus on trilateral defense meetings. Most notably, the three countries announced plans at Camp David to initiate multiyear trilateral military exercises, which will include annual exercises focusing on specific domains. They also announced plans to increase information sharing through a trilateral information-sharing arrangement started in 2014 as well as bilaterally through the GSOMIA. In addition to cooperation on North Korea, recent defense ministerial meetings and the Camp David agenda also focused on trilateral cooperation on maritime security and humanitarian aid and disaster relief.

Renewed trilateral defense cooperation began in August 2022 and has accelerated since the Camp David summit. The three militaries have conducted three ballistic missile defense exercises, two maritime operations exercises, and two trilateral aerial exercises since the end of August 2023 (see figure 1). North Korea continues to be a significant focus for the three states. In December 2023, the three nations held an inaugural working group meeting on countering cyber threats from North Korea. The trilateral partners have also announced progress on ballistic missile defense, announcing in late 2023 the launch of a real-time missile-warning system to better detect North Korean missile launches.

*The first-ever U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral aerial exercise was conducted on October 22, 2023, near the Korean Peninsula. Recent increased trilateral defense cooperation has been largely spurred by looming North Korean nuclear and missile threats.*

(Karla Parra/U.S. Air Force/DVIDS)
Japan and South Korea are also beginning to coordinate military evacuations of each other’s civilians from the Middle East because of the Israel-Hamas conflict. In October, the ROK military evacuated 51 Japanese citizens from Tel Aviv to a Korean air base using a KC-330 military aircraft—an unprecedented event. Likewise, the Japanese Air Self-Defense Force evacuated 18 South Koreans on a KC-767 the same month. Such cooperation is small but symbolically important, indicating deepening ties between the U.S. allies’ militaries on crucial rear-area support operations. These types of evacuation operations would likely be necessary in the event of a contingency requiring U.S. military intervention in the Indo-Pacific.

**FIGURE 1: TIMELINE OF U.S.-JAPAN-ROK MILITARY EXERCISES SINCE 2022**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Start Date</th>
<th>Purpose of the Exercise</th>
<th>Additional Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June 29, 2022</td>
<td>Maritime operations (RIMPAC 2022)</td>
<td>23 additional countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 8, 2022</td>
<td>Air and missile defense (Pacific Dragon 2022)</td>
<td>Australia and Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 8, 2022</td>
<td>Missile warning datalink sharing</td>
<td>Trilateral only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 30, 2022</td>
<td>Anti-submarine warfare</td>
<td>Trilateral only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 6, 2022</td>
<td>Ballistic missile defense</td>
<td>Trilateral only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 22, 2023</td>
<td>Ballistic missile defense</td>
<td>Trilateral only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 27, 2023</td>
<td>Field exercises and humanitarian assistance</td>
<td>Thailand (host), Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, plus 19 nonmembers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 15, 2023</td>
<td>Anti-submarine warfare (Sea Dragon 2023)</td>
<td>Canada and India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 3–4, 2023</td>
<td>Anti-submarine drills</td>
<td>Trilateral only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 17, 2023</td>
<td>Joint missile defense</td>
<td>Trilateral only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 4, 2023</td>
<td>Maritime operations (Pacific Vanguard 2023)</td>
<td>Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 16, 2023</td>
<td>Naval missile defense</td>
<td>Trilateral only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 22, 2023</td>
<td>Air combat and maritime operations (Talisman Sabre)</td>
<td>10 additional countries and three observers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 29, 2023</td>
<td>Ballistic missile defense</td>
<td>Trilateral only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 6, 2023</td>
<td>Ballistic missile defense</td>
<td>Trilateral only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 8–10, 2023</td>
<td>Maritime operations</td>
<td>Trilateral only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 17–20, 2023</td>
<td>Maritime operations</td>
<td>Trilateral only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 22, 2023</td>
<td>Aerial exercise</td>
<td>Trilateral only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 24–25, 2023</td>
<td>Ballistic missile defense</td>
<td>Trilateral only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 20, 2023</td>
<td>Aerial exercise</td>
<td>Trilateral only</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Competition with China Spurs Economic and Technology Cooperation**

Chinese economic competition and coercion constitute other driving factors for closer trilateral cooperation among Japan, South Korea, and the United States. When the ROK and the United States first deployed a Terminal High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) missile system in South Korea in February 2017, China protested via economic retaliation in a move that cost Korean companies billions of dollars, with Beijing...
claiming that THAAD deployment could be used for, among other things, intelligence-gathering purposes within China’s borders.\(^{50}\) South Korea’s economy is vulnerable to China in other ways as well. In 2021, an update to Chinese export requirements caused a urea crisis in South Korea because its economy relied on China for 97 percent of its imports of the chemical for cutting emissions from diesel cars and factories.\(^{51}\)

Chinese advances in various critical and emerging technologies also threaten Japanese, South Korean, and U.S. leadership in global technology research and development.\(^{52}\) Maintaining the lead in technology development is important for advancing intelligence capabilities, building leading-edge defense equipment, fostering economic growth, and cementing democratic technology norms and standards. Japan and the United States, which each have experienced economic coercion and supply chain disruption at the hand of China, have strong incentives to cooperate trilaterally with South Korea on economics and technology.

As Japan-ROK relations have warmed, the trilateral economic and technology relationship has quickly gained momentum. The three states have held several vice-ministerial meetings over the past few years to discuss critical and emerging technology issues such as supply chain resilience for semiconductors, electric vehicle batteries, and critical minerals.\(^{53}\) Leadership from all three countries has also encouraged increased technology cooperation among the nations’ business leaders—including semiconductor executives. For example, U.S. chip company Micron and South Korea’s Samsung are investing heavily in building semiconductor facilities in Japan, the latter planning to use upward of 20 billion yen, or roughly $135 million, in subsidies from the Japanese government.\(^{54}\)

All three states are part of the “Chip 4” technology dialogue, launched by the United States in March 2022, which provides Japan, South Korea, and the United States an opportunity to informally engage with Taiwan on issues pertaining to the global semiconductor industry.\(^{55}\) South Korea and Japan are likewise party to the United States’ May 2022 Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), which touts four pillars to deepen economic engagement and resilience in the Indo-Pacific region: fair and resilient trade; supply chains; clean energy, decarbonization, and infrastructure; and fair economic practices—all mutual priorities for the three nations.\(^{56}\)

Following their Camp David summit, President Yoon, Prime Minister Kishida, and President Biden expressed their shared resolve in “building robust cooperation in the economic security and technology spheres, leveraging the unique capabilities that each of our countries brings to bear.”\(^{57}\) In a joint statement, the three leaders committed to increased consultations between their respective finance, commerce, and industry ministers. They also called for increased collaboration on a range of critical technology areas, including semiconductors and batteries, biotechnology, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and space security, and emphasized the need to “accelerate green energy transition [and] mobilize financing for quality infrastructure and resilient supply chains.”\(^{58}\) At a meeting on the margins of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Silicon Valley in October 2023, Kishida and Yoon reiterated their shared interest to cooperate more closely on quantum and clean-energy supply chains, and Kishida was quoted as saying, “No single country can defend itself . . . the same is true with technology—no country alone can change the world.”\(^{59}\)

### Maintaining the lead in technology development is important for advancing intelligence capabilities, building leading-edge defense equipment, fostering economic growth, and cementing democratic technology norms and standards.

All three states have also shown interest in strengthening their respective biotechnology sectors. In September 2022, the Biden administration released an executive order (EO) to advance biotechnology and biomanufacturing for health, climate, agriculture, supply chains, and national and economic security.\(^{60}\) A few months later, the White House released its Bold Goals for U.S. Biotechnology and Biomanufacturing, reiterating the sector’s importance and setting ambitious targets to reach its potential.\(^{61}\) But the U.S. government has taken little concrete action over the last year to operationalize this agenda.

Meanwhile, South Korean biotechnology companies are looking to diversify away from China as U.S.-China tensions build, and Japanese biotechnology companies appear ready to work more closely with their South Korean counterparts. In April 2023, the Korean Biotechnology Industry Organization signed a memorandum of understanding for enhanced partnership on the sidelines of the Camp David summit with the United States’ Biotechnology Innovation Organization to coordinate on issues including supply chain management, information sharing, and research
and development. Later, in November 2023, Japan’s iPark Institute announced a massive business deal with South Korea’s Small and Medium Enterprise Venture Business Department to jointly support Korean Advanced Bio Startups focused on cell therapy agents, gene therapy agents, and regenerative medicine. Japan’s venture capital firm Miyako Capital, an affiliate of Kyoto University, also recently created a fund to raise approximately $141 million to support deep-tech biology and artificial intelligence startups. Japan’s Ministry of Economy, Technology, and Industry also started investing in biomanufacturing in 2023, setting aside 300 billion yen in subsidies.

Japan, South Korea, and the United States have also recently announced the launch of a high-level consultative group to address illegal North Korean cyber activities funding its nuclear and weapons of mass destruction programs. This targeted cyber coordination—focused on disrupting North Korean IT talent networks, engaging with industry on North Korean cyber threats, and coordinating capacity building—provides yet another opportunity for the three states to build trust around a common concern, while working on a critical, cross-cutting technology issue affecting the region.

Managing Hurdles

While Japan-South Korea rapprochement and the diplomatic momentum created by the Camp David summit offer many opportunities to deepen trilateral relations, there are also challenges that the three capitals will face in building a durable and sustainable trilateral partnership. Potential leadership changes resulting from the upcoming presidential elections in the United States or the election for president of the Liberal Democratic Party in Japan could pose obstacles to continued trilateral cooperation. The same is true for South Korea’s presidential election, although it will not be held for another three years. If someone other than Biden wins the November 2024 U.S. election, there is no guarantee that Washington will continue to prioritize the trilateral partnership, especially if bilateral U.S.-ROK ties suffer a downturn. Likewise, the hard-won Japan-South Korea détente is closely tied to foreign policies of Yoon and Kishida. Japan may walk back relations with South Korea if Kishida does not retain presidency of the Liberal Democratic Party in September 2024. South Korea may also walk back relations with Japan in 2027 if the progressive party takes control of the presidency, since progressive party leaders have been particularly critical of Japan’s colonial and wartime legacy in Korea.

Both Prime Minister Kishida and President Yoon are growing increasingly unpopular in their respective capitals, which means that the opposition parties can more easily exploit historical grievances between the two countries to criticize the leaders for investing in Japan-South Korea cooperation, even if such cooperation benefits the national security and economic interests of both states. Kishida’s ability to retain his role as president of the Liberal Democratic Party in the September 2024 presidential election will indicate whether the party values his diplomatic successes over his perceived domestic policy failures. Korea is facing a midterm election later this year, and it is unclear to what degree the outcome will affect Korean foreign policy. Korea expert Duyeon Kim argues that the midterm elections will not affect Yoon’s foreign policy because ROK foreign policies do not generally require national assembly approval. However, Yoon’s party will want to win in the April 2024 National Assembly elections to strengthen his party’s chances at a victory in the 2027 presidential elections, the outcome of which will affect the future tenability of trilateral relations. The South Korean public’s reaction to Yoon’s proposal for addressing the forced labor issue with Japan is a particularly important data point in predicting the future of Japan-South Korea relations. And while the Kishida administration has been largely supportive of improved ties with South Korea, it has also been somewhat wary of proactive outreach in case South Korea reneges on its existing agreements on wartime disputes.

Potential leadership changes resulting from the upcoming presidential elections in the United States or the election for president of the Liberal Democratic Party in Japan could pose obstacles to continued trilateral cooperation.

In the event of leadership changes in any of the three nations, a particular challenge would be sustaining intelligence-sharing efforts. For Tokyo and Seoul, only a few years have passed since the 2019 trade dispute that threatened to end the nations’ GSOMIA. The ROK government planned not to renew the GSOMIA due to Japanese export restrictions and the Japanese government’s decision to remove South Korea from its white list of trusted trading partners. Ultimately, the GSOMIA
was renewed at the final hour, but the South Korean government reserved the right to end the agreement at any time, and intelligence sharing was not fully normalized under the GSOMIA until 2023.\textsuperscript{74} If leadership changes in Tokyo or Seoul, there is a possibility that intelligence sharing could be under threat again on the basis of other issues in the bilateral relationship.

Assuaging fears over the durability of the trilateral partnership—amid a flurry of other new minilateral groupings in the region—will be another challenge. Some experts have described the Quad as a “forum without function” and “all shot and no powder” for its ambitious agenda and multiple initiatives, some of which have yet to be implemented.\textsuperscript{75} Leaders in Tokyo, Seoul, and Washington should be mindful of such criticisms as they seek to act on the agenda outlined in “The Spirit of Camp David.” Likewise, the abundance of U.S.-backed minilateral initiatives in the region may call into question the sustainability of the U.S. commitment to each forum.\textsuperscript{76}

The perceived durability and sustainability of the partnership will be a major factor in determining whether the three nations will continue the current momentum in defense cooperation. Not much time has passed since the 2018 radar lock-on incident in which Japan claims that a ROK naval vessel locked its fire-control radar on a Japanese Self-Defense Force P-1 patrol plane.\textsuperscript{77} Locking on to a target aircraft is commonly the final stage before opening fire. South Korea has denied responsibility for the incident and in 2019 issued guidelines to its navy to lock their fire-control radars on Japanese Self-Defense Force aircraft if they fly near ROK vessels after not responding to two warnings.\textsuperscript{78} Since the inauguration of President Yoon, however, leaders in Tokyo and Seoul state that they are making progress in withdrawing the guidelines issued to the Korean navy and resolving the radar lock-on dispute.\textsuperscript{79} There are limitations on trilateral military cooperation until Japan and South Korea can reach a solution to remove the guidelines aimed at Air Self-Defense Force aircraft.

Maintaining trilateral defense cooperation may also be challenging, given Chinese, Russian, and North Korean military activities in the region. China and Russia are performing joint naval and aerial exercises in the Sea of Japan intended to deter Japan-ROK-U.S. cooperation.\textsuperscript{80} Similarly, a Chinese fighter jet was caught performing dangerous maneuvers near an American B-52 bomber less than a week after Japan, South Korea, and the United States’ first-ever trilateral aerial exercise.\textsuperscript{81} North Korea and Russia are also increasing defense cooperation, with the former reportedly sending 1,000 containers of equipment and munitions to aid Russia’s war in Ukraine.\textsuperscript{82} Closer ties between the two states are a result of a September 2023 summit between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and Russian President Vladimir Putin, which included a tour of Russian military sites and discussions about weapons exchanges and assistance with North Korean satellite launches.\textsuperscript{83} Keeping the ROK involved in trilateral defense cooperation will be an especially important—and challenging—endeavor because of its close proximity to China, Russia, and North Korea.

Similarly, on the economic and technology fronts, the trilateral relationship still faces key challenges. While trilateral engagement in broader, multilateral forums is important to maintain trust, the United States has struggled to fully mobilize both the “Chip 4” technology
While their relationship is largely positive at present, Japan and South Korea must keep from slipping back into discord or risk jeopardizing not only the future of the bilateral relationship but the future of the trilateral partnership and the broader Indo-Pacific region.

Another irritant in the trilateral relationship is differing perspectives on Chinese economic statecraft. Beijing’s brazen economic coercion has brought all three states closer together in recent years. However, whereas Washington and Tokyo cite China as a “competitor” and “the greatest strategic challenge” in their respective national security strategies, Seoul remains primarily focused on the North Korean threat, although its threat perceptions related to China are growing. At the same time, South Korea is far more entrenched in Chinese markets than Japan and the United States, with China constituting roughly 41 percent of the market for South Korea’s semiconductor exports in the first half of 2020. Korean public opinion has soured toward China since the two clashed over the ROK’s installment of the THAAD missile defense system in 2017, but if the international community one day deems it necessary to fully extract semiconductor business operations from China, South Korea may be hard-pressed to sever ties.

And finally, just as technology cooperation can breed economic resiliency, weaponizing technology supply chains against allies and partners because of past resentment is counterproductive to each state’s economy and to strengthening the region as a whole. While their relationship is largely positive at present, Japan and South Korea must keep from slipping back into discord or risk jeopardizing not only the future of the bilateral relationship but the future of the trilateral partnership and the broader Indo-Pacific region. Relatedly, because Japan, South Korea, and the United States are all heavy hitters in the global semiconductor industry—and subsidize their domestic chip production—there will always be points of natural competition between the three countries. For example, all three states are competitive in wafer fabrication materials, and the United States and Japan both lead in manufacturing equipment. Although recent trilateral chip cooperation along the value chain has been promising, there is a chance that industry competition will prevent future meaningful cooperation.

Despite these challenges, there is more that unites Japan, South Korea, and the United States than divides them. Still, it will take sustained political will by all three capitals—beyond current leadership—to ensure that past grievances do not stymie potential for future cooperation.

U.S. Policy Recommendations

There are several ways that the United States can encourage expanded trilateral cooperation and help to institutionalize and regularize interactions and coordination among the three nations. More specifically, U.S. policymakers should focus on the following recommendations in the areas of diplomacy, defense, and economics and technology.

Diplomacy

Continue to press for expanded trilateral cooperation within the United Nations.

As of January 2024, both Japan and South Korea serve on the UN Security Council (UNSC) together as non-permanent members for the first time in 27 years. Because the United States is a permanent member of the UNSC, the three countries have a new, year-long venue to further coordinate on issues relevant to trilateral relations, such as North Korean human rights issues and nuclear nonproliferation. Mira Rapp-Hooper, U.S. Senior Director for East Asia and Oceania at the National Security Council, has affirmed that North Korea issues will be on the trilateral’s UNSC agenda. U.S. policymakers should also consider coordinating trilaterally on functional issues related to North Korea, such as humanitarian aid, cyberspace, and women, peace, and security. Using formal, multilateral forums such as the UNSC for
trilateral cooperation can help reinforce progress made elsewhere and provides a dedicated means to align on issues the three parties have agreed to tackle together.

Create an interagency working group to identify opportunities and gaps in coordination among different minilateral groups, including the Japan-ROK-U.S. trilateral, the Quad, the “Chip 4,” and the U.S.-Australia-Japan Trilateral Security Dialogue.

While minilaterals are a useful diplomatic tool because of their flexibility, they can also promote foreign policy inefficiencies due to their often ambitious and overlapping agendas. U.S. policymakers should stand up a working group to build synergies between the various U.S. minilaterals spanning the Indo-Pacific region. The working group should produce a written deliverable that identifies the major opportunities and gaps in the United States’ minilaterals to find new avenues for cooperation across the government’s various initiatives in the region. In addition to improving diplomatic efficiency, encouraging greater coordination among the various minilaterals would provide opportunities for Japan and South Korea to deepen their security relationships with like-minded partners, contributing to the development of a networked security architecture in the Indo-Pacific aligned with U.S. priorities.

Encourage trilateral cooperation beyond the Indo-Pacific.

Japan and South Korea are already coordinating some diplomatic activities in response to the Israel-Hamas conflict. On October 15, Japanese Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yoko called South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin to coordinate on developments in the Middle East, and the two states have evacuated each other’s citizens from Israel. The United States should take advantage of this progress and encourage trilateral cooperation in other regional or functional areas of mutual interest, such as energy security in the Middle East and Russia’s war in Ukraine.

Defense

Increase trilateral intelligence sharing to enhance collective maritime domain awareness.

Due to its vast size, a combination of ground, sea, air, and space assets is required to monitor security developments in the Pacific Ocean. The three countries could begin strengthening intelligence sharing beyond the North Korean missile threat by strengthening cooperation on maritime intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. Expanding into new functional areas of intelligence sharing would also provide opportunities for Japan and South Korea to develop their intelligence capabilities to meet Five Eyes standards—an important benchmark for developing capabilities equal to those of the United States.

Enhance trilateral contingency planning, especially for the evacuation of civilians.

All three countries have an incentive to work together in evacuating civilians in the event of a regional contingency involving Taiwan, as Japan and South Korea did in response to the Israel-Hamas conflict. The three should consider joint exercises that strengthen interoperability of the three militaries, while respecting each nation’s treaty obligations and constitutional limitations, to provide rear area support, such as logistics, sustainment, and civilian evacuation. Further, modernizing alliance command and control structures can help enhance trilateral contingency planning and interoperability, since the United States maintains a strong force posture in both Japan and South Korea.

Plan trilateral defense exercises that expand beyond traditional domains to include cyber and space.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated the importance of the cyber and space domains in modern warfare. All three Indo-Pacific aggressors—China, Russia, and North Korea—are known for and continue to invest in cyber and space capabilities. China, in particular, perceives U.S. dependency on space as a critical vulnerability that it can possibly exploit. Defense planners should therefore consider trilateral exercises outside of traditional domains, such as joint space domain awareness or active cyber defense.

Economics and Technology

Encourage trilateral cooperation to further quantum information science and technology (QIST) research and development and harness the technology’s economic potential.

QIST leverages physics to improve data acquisition, transmission, and processing and has the potential to accelerate breakthroughs and improve data security.
across science and technology disciplines and applications—including those used for national defense. The three states already have largely complementary national quantum technology strategies and capabilities, with the United States leading in quantum sensing, Japan excelling in quantum communications, and South Korea advancing in the field of quantum computing. In December 2023, a consortium of U.S., Japanese, and South Korean universities announced an initiative with IBM to train upward of 40,000 students over the next decade to develop a quantum workforce. The United States has bilateral quantum cooperation agreements with both partners, and Japan and South Korea recently announced a new collaborative framework with each other. All three states offer unique advantages across the QIST landscape, and would be wise to leverage each other’s strengths toward mutual advancement in this critical sector.

Launch a trilateral biotech industry working group and begin negotiations on a trilateral biotechnology cooperation agreement.

The Biden administration should engage more robustly on emerging biotechnology with Japan and South Korea as a key area for strategic cooperation. Such engagement could re-energize the momentum of the September 2022 White House executive order on biotechnology and biomanufacturing and spur critical biotechnology advances in the fields of health, climate, agriculture, manufacturing, and beyond. Because the private sector is the primary driver of innovation, the U.S. Department of Commerce should launch a trilateral biotech industry working group—bringing together sector leaders from the United States, Japan, and South Korea—to discuss opportunities for collaboration and obstacles for deeper sector engagement. While it may take time, the White House should drive toward formal talks with Seoul and Tokyo to develop a trilateral biotechnology cooperation agreement to encourage joint research and development at the leading edge of emerging biotechnology.

Build consensus both at home and with trilateral counterparts to operationalize the trade pillar of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF).

The Biden administration should work to build domestic and trilateral consensus around deeper engagement with IPEF members, particularly with regards to the fair and resilient trade pillar, to demonstrate the body’s strength—and by extension the United States’ strength as an organizing force—to a watchful China.

Conclusion

The 2023 Camp David summit signaled a turning point in U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral relations. President Yoon and Prime Minister Kishida deserve credit for initiating their détente, and the Biden administration should be applauded for seizing the opportunity created by warming Japan-South Korea relations to push forward a new trilateral agenda. Promising defense, technology, and economic developments bolstered by diplomacy suggest the trilateral relationship could be entering a new era of cooperation. Opportunities abound in the short term to deepen defense ties through joint military exercises, high-level consultations, and functional cooperation on issues such as anti-piracy and cyber defense. Likewise, deepening collaboration on technology among the three countries’ governments, universities, and businesses can spur innovation and advances that will help them compete with China.

The durability and sustainability of the trilateral partnership remain in limbo, however. Leadership change in Washington and Tokyo, both possibilities in 2024, could reverse the progress made under the Biden and Kishida administrations. Likewise, an unfavorable 2024 general election outcome for President Yoon’s conservative party might force the South Korean president to focus inward on domestic policy issues and less on foreign policy to regain political support in preparation for the 2027 presidential election. Long-standing fractures in the Japan-South Korea relationship will also remain thorns in the side of the trilateral relationship. Bilateral tensions over historical disputes, export controls, frictions in military-to-military communication, and threats to GSOMIA are obstacles Japanese and Korean leaders must carefully navigate to sustain the security benefits of closer trilateral cooperation.

The trilateral partnership offers a novel opportunity for Tokyo, Seoul, and Washington to reset relations and create a new partnership equipped to address the increasingly severe security environment facing the Indo-Pacific. Time will tell whether the significant progress achieved by the three leaders over the past two years will be durable enough to meet the critical challenges ahead.

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