



# **Resurgent Bilateralism and Trilateralism: Prospects for Enhanced Cooperation among the US, Japan, and Republic of Korea**

By Juliet Lee  
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In July 2022, the NCAFP's Forum on Asia-Pacific Security (FAPS) organized bilateral US-Republic of Korea (ROK) and trilateral US-Japan-ROK Track II video teleconferences (VTCs) to discuss the opportunities for and challenges to expanded cooperation on the Korean Peninsula, Indo-Pacific region, and beyond. Participants shared what they assess are their country's top policy priorities, whether or not the priorities align with those of their allies, and where potential perception gaps lie and how to overcome them. The following report summarizes the key takeaways, policy recommendations, and major points of discussion; and the attached appendices are records of selected talking points from participants.

## **Key Takeaways**

- Participants roundly declared the Biden-Yoon summit a success, but questions remained about the ROK's initiative for a "global pivotal state" and whether or not the Yoon administration would be able to follow through on such ambitious commitments beyond the Korean Peninsula with the North Korean security threat next door. Participants recognized President Yoon's intent to present his own Indo-Pacific strategy and desires to commit the ROK to broader multilateral frameworks, a stark contrast to former President Moon's hesitancy to join multilateral groupings in the Indo-Pacific. But would this commitment last beyond the Yoon administration?
- While the US, ROK, and Japan share common interests in enhancing bilateral and trilateral cooperation, the three countries have varying threat perceptions and foreign policy priorities. Perhaps one of the most notable policy gaps lies in the North Korean nuclear challenge, with each side experiencing differing degrees of urgency in addressing the issue despite the DPRK's ramping up of provocations and shared concerns about a seventh nuclear test. The three countries will need to enhance trilateral coordination to prevent disruptions to cooperation resulting from differences in expectations.

- The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war and deepening US-China rivalry loomed large over these discussions. Participants acknowledged that the war in Ukraine has heightened US allies' qualms over the reliability of extended deterrence, with Japan increasing its defense budget to build new missile defense capabilities and the ROK having open debates about tactical US nuclear weapons on South Korean soil. Furthermore, new defense pacts, such as AUKUS, exacerbate US-China tensions.
- Participants highlighted the growing challenge of polarized domestic politics on respective foreign policies. The leaders of both the US and the ROK face declining approval ratings, and there are concerns about what the potential outcomes of the November midterm elections in the US might mean for US foreign policy. Despite leader-level support for improving Japan-ROK relations, participants cautioned that public opinion in the two countries may constrain the leaders' ability to make progress on what is still seen as the "weak link" in trilateral cooperation. The discussions were held only a few days after the assassination of Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, and participants assessed that this shocking event would have a lingering effect on Japan's security, defense and foreign policy.
- Overall, there is still reason to be cautiously optimistic about a new era of positive relations. One participant compared notes from previous US-Japan-ROK Track II dialogues in 2019, and noted that despite the looming challenges and perception gaps, there is greater scope for collaboration and cooperation given the recent leadership transitions and the evolving international security environment.

### **Policy Recommendations**

- The US, Japan, and the ROK need to set a realistic agenda for trilateral cooperation. There remains an urgent need to refashion diplomacy with the DPRK that keeps denuclearization as the ultimate, but not immediate, goal. In the absence of (and to try to elicit) diplomatic engagement with North Korea, the three countries should improve trilateral and multilateral coordination on humanitarian aid to the North. Additionally, policymakers can draw lessons on engagement from 2017 and 2018, when there was extraordinary diplomatic coordination and a global campaign to enforce UN sanctions following a North Korean nuclear test.
- Confidence needs to be carefully restored in Japan-ROK relations. This should be done by resolving the GSOMIA issue and expanding cooperation on intelligence sharing, resuming military exercises, and engaging in active contingency planning.
  - Specifically, military-to-military exchanges were once seen as one of the more stable aspects of Japan-ROK relations. However, the exercises were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and have not been occurring as normal. These exchanges can contribute to rebuilding confidence between the two countries, especially among the next-generation leaders as they move up within the services.

- On the issue of the ROK Supreme Court cases on forced labor, there is a need to identify non-governmental ways to address the issue that leaders could facilitate. Private corporations could agree to a common fund to compensate the plaintiffs in these cases.
- Furthermore, it is necessary to understand how the ROK and Japan position themselves in aligning more closely with the US while also remaining cautious with respect to their relationships with China. It is also important for each of the three countries to have a long-term China strategy that factors in China's internal dynamics.

### **The ROK as a “Global Pivotal State”**

These Track II discussions were held a couple of months after the summit between President Yoon and President Biden, and only a couple of weeks following the NATO and G7 summits, both of which the ROK attended for the first time. Participants generally praised the Yoon-Biden summit as “a step above” the Moon-Biden summit from last year, which was already seen as highly successful. However, there are lingering questions about the ROK as a “global pivotal state” and what that would mean in practice.

An ROK participant clarified that the “global pivotal state” framework was coined during the Yoon campaign as a response to then-President Moon's reluctance to join multilateral coalitions in the Indo-Pacific. This participant noted that then-candidate Yoon created the term to demonstrate that the ROK, under his leadership, would increase its commitment to the region and beyond by being more proactive in joining minilaterals and multilaterals. For the ROK, being a “global pivotal state” is about preserving the rules-based order, and is not solely about dealing with China and North Korea.

As such, the expansion of the ROK's footprint in the multilateral scene has come in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, which has broader implications for the Indo-Pacific region. Some Korean participants characterized the ROK's participation at the NATO summit as having a “refreshed outlook” to soft-balance against China and North Korea, but acknowledged that due to polarized public opinion about the issue of balancing against China, the summit was viewed unfavorably by the ROK public as targeting China and Russia and having negative effects on prospects for cooperation on the Korean Peninsula.

A US participant believed that the “global pivotal state” was aspirational and more political. There is the sense that the ROK has a vision of itself as a global actor and contributor to global public goods, compared to “global Korea” which was focused on soft power and cultural influence. A Korean participant was particularly worried about promoting values-based diplomacy “to another level,” disagreeing with the notion that the world is divided into “democracies versus autocracies.”

Furthermore, the Yoon administration has announced its own Indo-Pacific Strategy, although specific details remain unknown. Some participants shared anxieties about this, acknowledging that there is a desire to cooperate more with the US, which seems intent on competing with China. However, the ROK also has practical reasons for wanting to slow down this trend of increasing rivalry between the two great powers. Economic relations with China are vital for economic stability, especially in times of great inflation and public dissatisfaction with the economy.

### **Is there a China Policy?**

In US foreign policy discourse today, engaging China has become taboo, and US China strategy has devolved into competition at all costs. Participants from all sides hoped that this trend could be reversed, and “engagement” could be revived. For Japan, its China strategy is often discussed in the context of defense, or vis-à-vis the US, particularly regarding cooperation on Taiwan. For the ROK, China is seen as the most important factor in ROK relations with the DPRK and on Korean Peninsula issues. Overall, there was general agreement on the need for each country, and as a trilateral, to have a long-term China strategy that includes cooperation, as opposed to just a regional strategy of engaging only like-minded allies and partners.

To have such a China strategy, there needs to be a better understanding of China’s internal dynamics, recognizing that China has its own domestic burdens—both political and economic. Internal vulnerabilities often influence external behaviors. While the focus of policy discussions is often on US policy towards China, participants from both Japan and the ROK acknowledged that their respective countries need their own China policy that is not one of appeasement and also pays attention to China’s internal dynamics.

### **Gaps in North Korea Policy**

Most striking in these discussions was how the DPRK nuclear issue was not seen as being high on the agendas of the three leaders. Participants lamented that there appears to be no active plan for reengaging North Korea, or for making the diplomatic process more dynamic. The US is preoccupied with the Russia-Ukraine war and with economic recovery at home. Japan appears to be more focused on Taiwan and the East China Sea, and a Japanese participant pointedly remarked that the DPRK is simply “not on the agenda for Japan” despite the repeated missile tests and an imminent seventh nuclear test. For the ROK, the North Korea nuclear issue is seen as competing with the Yoon administration’s desires for the ROK to become a “global pivotal state.” However, the Yoon administration still places high priority on the North Korea nuclear issue, but few details are known about his so-called “audacious plan” for denuclearization. Participants agreed that the lack of a sense of urgency to deal with North Korean nuclear issue will make it very difficult to reengage and bring North Korea back to the negotiating table, despite the shared interest in preventing a crisis or conflict on the Peninsula.

While the Moon administration's North Korea policy was focused on peace initiatives, current ROK policy is concentrated more than ever on deterrence. But questions remain: what are we deterring? Participants acknowledged the success in deterring all-out military attack by the DPRK, but the three countries have not been able to deter DPRK testing and its development of more advanced capabilities. As a result, Northeast Asia is in an insecurity spiral, with all countries working on building up their defenses in the face of elevated threat perceptions.

Despite these difficulties, participants agreed that the three countries should not give up on diplomacy with the DPRK. US participants pointed to lessons from 2017 and 2018, when the US and ROK led a global campaign to enforce UN sanctions against the DPRK. This is something to consider in anticipation of the DPRK's seventh nuclear test, although it is recognized that the Russia-Ukraine conflict has severely hindered prospects for close coordination on the North Korea issue at the UN. A Japanese participant pointed out that the relevant parties need to distinguish between denuclearization as an end goal versus as an entrance point to negotiations. A US participant argued for the need to move away from a transactional approach where North Korea holds all the power to control the process based on Pyongyang's willingness to take the first steps.

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# **The Assessment of the ROK-US Summit and the Tasks Ahead**

By CHUNG Kuyoun

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During the latest ROK-US summit in May 2022, the priorities the two allies pursued included securing economic security, deterring the provocations of North Korea, and forging much broader regional cooperation beyond the Korean Peninsula. For the US, who will hold a midterm election this November, the top priority is to secure economic security. At the time of inflation and his unprecedentedly low approval rating, President Biden needed an ally's support to strengthen the US economy by convincing South Korean companies like Samsung and Hyundai to launch new operations in the United States and to replace the China-oriented supply chain with that of a reliable partner. Besides, the Biden administration wanted to reassure its Asian allies, who are living with the threat of North Korean provocations and who questioned the US security commitment while President Trump was in office.

President Yoon, who wants not only to restore the ROK-US relationship but also to upgrade it to a comprehensive strategic alliance, was faced with the need to achieve more than the previous summits between Presidents Moon and Biden. What sets the Yoon administration apart from the previous Moon administration is its emphasis on its commitment to the rules-based order as well as universal values that undergird existing multilateralism, which is the foundation of its new foreign policy vision in which it acts as a "global pivotal state." The Yoon administration's scaled-up commitment to global affairs is welcomed by the Biden administration, which is eager to mobilize like-minded countries that balance the revisionist powers—China and Russia in particular. The Yoon administration's North Korea policy, which emphasizes deterrence of North Korea, is also better received by the US, as it was less coordinated under the previous Moon administration's peace initiative. Besides, the emphasis on deterrence naturally led to South Korea-US-Japan trilateral cooperation.

To sum up, the latest ROK-US summit can be evaluated positively in that it identified and confirmed the common interests between two allies in a rapidly changing international environment. However, challenges still remain, especially how great power competition between the US, China, and now Russia and Russia's invasion of Ukraine can affect North Korea's understanding of the current strategic environment. While the US and its allies are putting pressure on China to undermine the sustainability of a Russia-China alignment, such pressure will certainly have a ripple effect on South Korea in the long run.

## **How to Denuclearize North Korea Remains Unclear**

As South Korea's new North Korea policy is now being drafted by the Yoon administration, the key issue becomes how to bring North Korea back to the negotiating table. As the Biden administration's North Korea policy focuses on diplomacy and deterrence, US officials have attempted to engage in dialogue with their counterparts in North Korea at all levels over the years. However, the North Koreans have not reacted realistically yet. Although the COVID-19 pandemic

and corresponding North Korean border lockdown were speculated as the source of their unresponsiveness, North Korea has conducted missile tests more than 18 times so far in 2022 alone, which signals that it will continue to pursue the status of a nuclear state and to develop a credible and survivable nuclear weapon-delivery system. Against this backdrop, for the first time at the summit level, both the ROK and the US agreed to provide extended deterrence using all defense capabilities, including nuclear, conventional, and missile defenses. Also, they agreed on discussing timely, rotational deployment of US strategic assets. Besides, ROK-US military exercises are important not only for maintaining a posture to respond to North Korean provocations but also for verifying the full operational capability (FOC) for the wartime OPCON transfer within the year.

While the two allies are strengthening measures to counter North Korea's threat, they do not have any fresh ideas to bring North Korea to the negotiating table. The Yoon administration will definitely put more emphasis on economic sanctions and surveillance over illegal ship-to-ship transfers, but its idea of providing economic assistance in exchange for denuclearization is not new. Besides, the Biden administration's calibrated practical approach toward the North does not include the global maximum pressure campaign which might have served as a catalyst for holding a series of summits during the Trump administration. South Korea's principled approach toward China, with its strong commitment to the rules-based order, might be an obstacle to eliciting cooperation from China, which is one of the few benefactors of North Korea. It is uncertain whether North Korea's denuclearization will remain as an area of cooperation between the US and China.

### **South Korea Will Face Challenges as it Scales Up its Commitment in the Indo-Pacific**

President Yoon's new foreign policy vision, which is now called the "global pivotal state," attempts to scale up its global commitment while taking a position of strategic clarity, which is a major departure from the previous Moon administration's hedging strategy that maintained strategic ambiguity between the US and China.

To this end, South Korea will promote reconciliation with Japan and strengthen trilateral cooperation between the US and Japan in the first place. Also, South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy will be announced within the year, and South Korea expects its scaled-up regional commitment can complement the workings of the Quad and other regional multilateral coalitions. Attending the NATO summit as a member of Asia Pacific Four (AP4) demonstrates its commitment. To promote investment in sustainable growth, energy security, and infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific region, South Korea plans to cooperate with ASEAN and Pacific Island countries to strengthen regional cooperation in the areas of pandemics, climate change, and emerging technologies.

However, how South Korea can overcome Chinese economic and military coercion will be the most significant challenge. While the Yoon administration emphasizes a principled approach toward China and assumes that Seoul does not have to feel pressured to choose between the US and China, it still needs Beijing's support in sustaining momentum to initiate a dialogue with North Korea.

## **Tasks Ahead**

While the Yoon administration is clearly more proactive than the previous Moon administration in regional affairs and understands the imperative to advance onto the global stage under great power rivalry, the potential perception gap between the US and ROK over the expectations and actual performance needs to be communicated.

Furthermore, given that both allies seem to assume that the North Korea issue cannot be resolved in a short period of time, it is necessary to develop a more sustainable, effective approach to providing extended deterrence, and an alternative way of making North Korea return to the negotiating table in the first place. Now that the US has been distracted by the Ukraine conflict, South Korea needs to step up to proactively lead the inter-Korean relationship and convince North Korea that nuclear development will not be conducive to sustaining its regime security.

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# Further Steps for Enhancing ROK-US Policy Coordination

By KIM Ki-jung

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## Assessing the Yoon-Biden Summit

While the Moon-Biden Summit held a year ago marked a historic event for opening a new chapter in the 140-year-old bilateral relationship, the Yoon-Biden Summit displayed a willingness of continuity to enhance future bilateral ties. The recent summit is symbolic as it signifies the alliance has been working as an efficient and successful instrument for mutual-beneficiary growth. It also exhibited the steadfast relationship between South Korea and the US, which has been continuously upgraded regardless of a particular individual or party.

The Yoon-Biden Summit showed a stronger and more detailed commitment of cooperation toward regional as well as global issues, including a sustainable and resilient global supply chain, global health, democracy and human rights, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), global warming, and cyber security. Nevertheless, although the two leaders agreed on further cooperation beyond the Korean Peninsula, there are still some concerns. It is questionable how Yoon's 'audacious plan for denuclearization' and Biden's 'support for inter-Korean cooperation' will be blended. Both agreed to call on North Korea to return to negotiations, but a specific and feasible idea is yet to be suggested.

## ROK-US Alliance and Dealing with North Korea: Building a Workable Triadic Structure

It is obvious that Northeast Asian regional stability cannot be achieved without peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. The ROK-US alliance has been and will continue to be the lynchpin for the security of South Korea, but a more comprehensive and strategic approach toward North Korea and the triadic relations vis-à-vis China would be required. The triadic relationship among South Korea, North Korea, and the US has been deformed and deactivated, and unless a more productive approach is devised, North Korea will likely accelerate its dependence on China.

- Structure
  - Rather than a workable, virtuous cycle of interaction, the US, South Korea, and North Korea have formed a vicious cycle that contains and constantly reproduces the sentiments of fear, suspicion, hatred, jealousy, distrust, and hostility. Such an unstable structure has occasionally resulted in a lack of creative imagination when projecting the strategic interests of each party.

- The triad is displayed as either a “2 + 1” or “2 vs. 1” structure. With a stronger ROK-US alliance, North Korea is likely to show some degree of uneasiness and increase hostility. South Korea is likely to exhibit ambivalence toward exclusive dialogues between North Korea and the US, as a tacit follower or marginal member of the triad. Rapprochement between South Korea and North Korea will likely sow suspicions in the US.
  - The Yoon-Biden pair will likely reinforce the “2 vs. 1” structure. North Korea seems to be focused on its own logic of self-reliance and self-defense ever since the no-deal at Hanoi. The triad has been obviously deactivated since the US-North Korea bilateral negotiations at Stockholm in October 2019 broke off. The COVID-19 pandemic has also contributed to stalled relations.
  - The key is how not to repeat the old patterns of the deactivated triad which have been influenced by national perceptions and sentiments rather than objective calculation of strategic interests. This should be the starting point for “enhancing policy coordination” between South Korea and the US for peace and stability on the Peninsula and in the Indo-Pacific region.
- Review
    - From 2017 to 2021, the Moon administration witnessed and experienced fluctuations on the Korean Peninsula. Viewed from South Korea, the fluctuations consisted of crisis and new initiatives (2017), dramatic change and hope (2018), patience (2019), and aborted breakthrough (2020 & 2021). As the Yoon administration aims to stand firm against North Korea, the situation is likely to return to that of 2017 and before. The question is how to manage and control the highly probable tensions caused by North Korea in the near future.
    - Triad relations have been paid less attention on the US priority list. US behaviors have been observed as either inactive (i.e., strategic patience) or reactive, mostly preferring the status quo. At Hanoi, prioritizing domestic politics seemed to override the diplomatic opportunity. Due to various other global and domestic issues such as the Russia-Ukraine war, China, Taiwan, inflation, and the upcoming mid-term elections, many assume that Biden’s North Korean policy will return to that of the Obama period.
    - From 2012 to 2018, Kim Jong Un’s strategic calculation was focused on economic development. Kim exhibited a strong willingness for economic development which was partially motivated by the need to strengthen the legitimacy for a 3<sup>rd</sup> generation power-successor. Kim Il-sung’s legacy was the ‘*Juche*’ ideology, while Kim Jong-il gained the people’s support with his ‘military-first’ (national defense) policy. Kim Jong Un has continuously emphasized the doctrine of ‘people-first (caring for people)’. This principle was the background for Kim Jong Un’s positive response to South Korea’s initiative of 2018. After the no-deal at Hanoi, however, North Korea’s domestic discourse changed from a focus on development to security.

- Concerns

- The Yoon administration is likely to sustain its strong commitment for peace through deterrence and its superior military power against North Korea without a visible intention for rapprochement. In the foreign policy realm, there are concerns that South Korea may be losing its flexibility by hastening steps toward regional, as well as global, scale of bloc-formation.
- The Biden administration seems to intensify its confrontations with China by strengthening its ties with Japan, South Korea, and other allies. Regarding the Korean Peninsula, the US seems reluctant to realign its policy priorities and thus will eventually reiterate 'strategic patience' version 2.
- North Korea is stressing the principles of self-reliance and self-defense by advancing its nuclear capabilities of both strategic and tactical nuclear weapons. Denuclearization was once considered negotiable, but self-defense through enhanced nuclear capabilities has become evident, with the Russia-Ukraine war consolidating such beliefs. The recent appointment of the 'iron-lady' (Choe Son Hui) as the Foreign Minister implies that North Korea will maintain a strong stance. With regard to the Sino-American competition over supply-chains and global supremacy, North Korea seems to have no other option than to lean towards China amid a global situation with increased threats and uncertainties.

- Strategies

- If a normative assumption is applicable, South Korea and the US need to admit that an intentional spiral of tension would not be a desirable option for managing the Peninsula issue. Two possible strategic options for the US and South Korea are:
  - ① Stable management of plausible tensions, namely the status quo, while South Korea and US manage and control the pace of North Korea's dependence/inclination towards China, which includes strategic calculations regarding the practice of joint military exercises. Both need to reaffirm the trilateral cooperation (ROK-US-Japan) with a consideration of unanticipated side-effects.
  - ② In order to revive, even partially, the virtuous cycle of the triad, audacious steps must be imagined:
    - Considering the domestic political / ideational circumstances of North Korea, it is unlikely that Kim Jong Un will repeat the old (and failed) process of Panmunjom, Singapore and Hanoi. Kim will need a new justification to return to the negotiation table.
    - Past methods of implementation (verbal commitment for an exchange between North Korea's denuclearization process and partial relaxation of

sanctions) are no longer valid. Another course of persuasion that was once designed during the Moon administration (the End-of-War declaration → alleviating hostile attitudes → concluding a peace treaty → diplomatic normalization) would not assuredly guarantee North Korea's return to negotiations. Instead, diplomatic normalization could be regarded as a viable sign and solution by North Korea to reduce US hostility. A step-by-step process for trust-building no longer seems to work.

Cooperation and policy coordination between South Korea and the US are necessary for the stable management of the Korean Peninsula. However, ideas and interests must also be shared at the same time: both sides need to raise the same questions and work together in the search for answers: "What will be the most efficient path toward regional peace?" "Will an antagonistic balance of power assure regional stability?" "How to handle future costs possibly derived from the status quo?" And "How to share ideas of joint engagement toward North Korea, if necessary?"

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# **US-Japan-ROK Trilateral Cooperation: A ROK Perspective**

By CHO Eunil

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## **Revitalizing Trilateralism as the Yoon Government's Foreign Policy Agenda**

South Korea's newly elected President Yoon Seok Yeol has emphasized security cooperation with the US and Japan as a format of trilateralism. The Yoon government has called for revitalizing US-Japan-ROK trilateral cooperation as part of its national policy agenda. The Yoon administration seems to be differentiating itself from the previous Moon government, which was less enthusiastic about trilateral cooperation.

For the Yoon government, the purpose of trilateral cooperation is two-fold: first, it aims to restore the format of trilateral dialogue as a way for diplomacy. As the Yoon government stresses diplomacy with countries that share democratic values, trilateral cooperation, along with US-ROK cooperation, have become important items on the agenda. The important point here reflects that ROK-Japan relations should be improved toward a future-oriented relationship, and that trilateral cooperation should be promoted together to enhance US-ROK relations.

Second, the Yoon government aims to show North Korea that three democratic countries have a coordinated position in coping with North Korea's escalating nuclear and missile threats. The administration says that they will not proceed with negotiations unless North Korea takes steps to denuclearize first. It also emphasizes that the ROK and the US will take an alliance response to North Korea's provocations. For example, ROK and US forces fired eight missiles on June 6 in response to North Korea firing the same number of missiles a day earlier. The response to such provocations is currently only being made at the bilateral, US-ROK level. In addition, the Yoon government considers trilateral strategic dialogue and possible defense cooperation as an effective way to counter North Korea's provocations. In that way, trilateralism serves as a coordinated response to North Korean threat.

Both the Biden administration and the Kishida administration agree to these two main purposes for trilateral cooperation. It is a good sign for the ROK to promote its foreign policy agenda in support by both the US and Japan. The US and Japan both welcomed the ROK's emphasis on trilateral cooperation for a regional security dialogue. The recent NATO summit was a good venue to start trilateral dialogue.

### **But Domestic Politics Matter**

Yes, it seems that the Yoon government is considering trilateral dialogue as a restoration of trust that has been worsening for years. This is why the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, other than the Presidential Office or the Ministry of National Defense, takes the lead on trilateral dialogue. The next step is going to be security cooperation, and in order to discuss details, the GSOMIA issue must be resolved. Foreign Minister Park Jin, when he visited the US, said that the GSOMIA should be normalized. But, as we have experienced, it is quite a delicate issue. So, once the GSOMIA issue is settled, then it is much easier to restart trilateral security (and defense) cooperation.

As in the case of GSOMIA, ROK-Japan relations are quite complex in both societies. The pending issues, such as the forced labor issue, have not yet been resolved. Both the Yoon government and the Kishida administration have a heavy domestic political burden to take the lead in resolving pending issues. Both should resolve the compensation issue ruled by the ROK Supreme Court for the victims of forced labor. However, the approval rating has been falling since the early stage of the Yoon administration. Since the inauguration in May, about 3 months, the approval rating has fallen to around 30%. Under such circumstances, it is less likely to tackle pending issues to improve bilateral relations with Japan. The increasing number of COVID-19 cases, as well as an economic downturn with rising consumer prices, are negative signs on the prospects of initiating a diplomatic agenda that has been unpopular in domestic politics for years. On the other hand, the Kishida administration's position on the compensation ruling for the forced labor has been too rigid. Japan argues that resolving the compensation ruling is a prerequisite for improving relations with the ROK. So, without resolving these pending issues, there will be limitations in promoting and enhancing trilateral cooperation.

### **Prospects for Trilateral Cooperation**

Domestic politics and audience costs are obviously important in regard to ROK-Japan relations. Nevertheless, there is a strategic need for trilateral cooperation, and the three countries all agree on the necessity for it. They share a common ground that trilateral cooperation is beneficial for their security. Such a willingness and, above all, the Yoon government's commitment are certainly an opportunity to revitalize US-Japan-ROK trilateralism. The Global Pivotal State (GPS) strategy by the Yoon government helps to deepen trilateral cooperation as well as to improve ROK-Japan relations.

But the Russian war against Ukraine seems to destabilize regional security by giving North Korea a wrong signal. In other words, as North Korea is known to be preparing for its seventh nuclear test, there is concern that the Russian invasion could lead to a misinterpretation that military action could be made easier. As the US and Russia are against each other, North Korea may expect that any resolution that condemns North Korea's provocation can be resolved through the UN Security Council, even if it conducts a nuclear test. In that sense, the Russian war may result in increasing military tension and would-be conflicts in the Northeast Asia region.

Trilateral cooperation is important to provide stability in regional security at a time when Russia's offensive actions continue, and the possibility of North Korea's nuclear test continues to be raised. It is unlikely that China will be comfortable with the Yoon government emphasizing trilateral dialogue with the US and Japan and taking a tough stance on North Korea. China seems to consider the Yoon government's diplomatic position narrowing the diplomatic space with China. For example, China made strong remarks on the ROK's attendance at the NATO summit. Yes, concerns about trade relations with China remains important. But, as the Yoon government commits to diplomacy based on universal values, distancing from China is likely to proceed for a while.

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# **What is to be Done for US-Japan-Korea Cooperation? A South Korean Perspective**

By KIM Hyun-wook

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## **South Korea's Priority in Trilateral Cooperation: DPRK**

South Korea's priority in trilateral cooperation lies in how to deal with the DPRK. The Yoon government is poised to treat North Korea with reciprocity: it is willing to provide security or economic support to North Korea if it achieves any substantive denuclearization steps.

But in reality, North Korea is far from being denuclearized. Recently, North Korea developed diverse strategic missiles which can nullify the South Korean missile defense system. Also, the 7<sup>th</sup> nuclear test is expected to miniaturize nuclear warheads, which seems to be a tactical nuclear weapon test. Unlike strategic nukes, tactical nuclear weapons can be used in a real battlefield. North Korea is already a nuclear weapon possessing state. The threats of North Korea are becoming more and more severe on the Korean Peninsula.

South Korea and the United States would not accept North Korea as the 9<sup>th</sup> nuclear state, but each for a different reason. Current US policy of denuclearizing North Korea does not reflect reality. North Korea already possesses medium and long-range missiles to deliver nuclear weapons, and it is already a nuclear weapon possessing state. If the US accepts North Korea as a nuclear state, it will prompt many other states in Asia to go nuclear. This will damage the NPT system. Also, this will weaken the US-South Korea and US-Japan alliances because two US' allies would attempt to go nuclear.

On the other hand, South Korea (and maybe Japan, too), sticks to denuclearization of North Korea because of security reasons. If North Korea launches any nuclear missiles against South Korea, this will devastate South Korean territory. A nuclear North Korea right next to South Korea has been an ongoing fear.

Current tensions between the US and China in the Taiwan Strait and a possible Chinese attempt to occupy Taiwan in the near future pose more fear to South Korea. One possible scenario is that, in order to prevent the USFK and Indo-Pacific Command from entering war in the Taiwan Strait, China would make North Korea undertake military provocation against the South. In this vein, the new South Korean government is searching for ways to bolster deterrence measures against the North.



## **Ukraine's Implication for Security and Stability in Asia**

Russia's invasion of Ukraine became a critical juncture for states in Europe and other areas to be divided into two blocs. European states are aligned with the United States, NATO is increasing its defense budget, and Sweden and Finland are applying for memberships to NATO. Also, NATO members recently adopted a Strategic Concept in which China was described as a systemic challenge. More NATO states are to be committed to the Indo-Pacific area, which is also becoming divided into two different blocs.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine heightens security concerns around the world. Moreover, Putin's threat to use nuclear weapons is expanding and heightening nuclear threats and fears in the world. Former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo mentioned the possibility of nuclear sharing, which well reflects the current mood of the Japanese public. A South Korean public opinion poll also displays increasing propensity towards nuclear armament. North Korea, in the middle of the war in Ukraine, clarified nuclear first use doctrine, which deepened security concerns for South Korea. All in all, currently Northeast Asian states are justifying their military buildup, and this will increase instability in this region. A North Korean 7<sup>th</sup> nuclear test would further accelerate regional states' military build-up.

## **South Korea's Relations with China**

South Korean people are becoming more and more anti-Chinese. Current opinion poll shows that 77% of South Korean people are anti-Chinese.<sup>1</sup> This sentiment began to increase after the THAAD deployment and Chinese economic coercive measures against South Korea.

The new South Korean government's diplomatic position is changing. If the previous South Korean position was about 6:4 between the US and China, it is likely to change to 7:3 or 8:2. This does not mean that the new government's relationship with China would be antagonistic. But due to COVID-19 and the Biden government's supply chain formation on key industries, South Korea now has more opportunities from the United States to increase its economic interests.

The new South Korean government is now developing its own regional strategy, which would be much more diverse and comprehensive compared to the previous government's New Southern Policy. The New Southern Policy's purpose was to diversify economic relationships which had been too focused on China. The new regional strategy would upgrade South Korea's economic diversification measures, and it also would deal with a regional security agenda.

The new regional strategy would be the first attempt to make South Korea's own autonomous regional strategy. And this will be a good basis for future trilateral cooperation with the US and Japan.

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<sup>1</sup> Pew Research, June 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/06/30/chinas-international-image-remains-broadly-negative-as-views-of-the-u-s-rebound/>

## Policy Recommendations

First, the trilateral mechanism should focus on how to bolster military deterrence measures against external threats, including North Korea. A “trilateral extended deterrence coordination mechanism” is what South Korea and Japan need. The ROK and US Presidents agreed upon “the US extended deterrence commitment to the ROK using the full range of US defense capabilities, including *nuclear*, conventional, and missile defense capabilities.”<sup>2</sup> The US-Japan joint statement also emphasized “the US commitment to the defense of Japan under the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, backed by the full range of capabilities, including *nuclear*.”<sup>3</sup> Now is the right time for the three countries to discuss extended deterrence measures.

Second, the three countries should cooperate on Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), first announced by the Quad countries. South Korea has been a victim of Chinese illegal fishery. In order to strengthen maritime security around the Korean Peninsula and in the regional boundary, South Korea needs to develop its own surveillance capabilities and at the same time to participate in IPMDA.

Finally, the three countries need to cooperate on key industry supply chains. Key industries like semi-conductors and batteries are important areas for trilateral cooperation. This can be expanded into more multilaterals, like the US Indo-Pacific Economic Framework.

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<sup>2</sup> “United States-Republic of Korea Leaders’ Joint Statement,” *The White House*, May 21, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/21/united-states-republic-of-korea-leaders-joint-statement/>.

<sup>3</sup> “Japan-U.S. Joint Leaders’ Statement: Strengthening the Free and Open International Order,” *The White House*, May 23, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/23/japan-u-s-joint-leaders-statement-strengthening-the-free-and-open-international-order/>.

# **U.S.-Japan-ROK Trilateral: Confidence and Alignment**

By Sheila A. SMITH

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The trilateral relationship between the United States, Japan and the Republic of Korea remains one of our most important strategic partnerships. Elections in Seoul and Tokyo have produced an opportunity to regain confidence between our treaty allies, and this political opportunity for strengthening trilateral engagement offers hope for adjusting our agenda to the realities of contemporary geopolitics. First and foremost, we must deepen trust on the military and intelligence sharing aspects of our trilateral ties so that we can upgrade our deterrent across both alliances. Second, we must expand our diplomatic strategy to include economic resilience and security initiatives with like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific and Europe. Finally, we should develop a trilateral mechanism for understanding and sharing analysis of not only North Korea, but also of China and Russia.

## **Trilateral Security Cooperation**

Security cooperation among these three allies continues to be the foundation of our partnership. Trust between and among our militaries must be assured. To date, we have focused on North Korea, and this remains our priority. Air defense exercises have resumed, and ballistic missile defenses could be upgraded to meet Pyongyang's enhanced capabilities. Intelligence sharing is also being normalized. But we must also consider going beyond these missions to include exercises that assess and strengthen our capabilities across multiple domains (cyber, maritime, and space). Integrated exercises that include operations on each allies' territory remain challenging but should be considered where feasible, should those combined capabilities be envisioned as necessary in a crisis.

We might also consider how the tensions and responses of 2017 shaped our thinking about how to improve trilateral readiness and deterrence. Each alliance designed their own response and at times, synchronized that response, to missile tests. Was this effective? What more could be done? What were the lessons learned? A similar set of questions might also address the diplomatic efforts that evolved out of that confrontational year. What did each of us take away from the experience of direct talks between the U.S. and Kim Jong Un? How did this approach shape allied perceptions of U.S. reliability? How could we imagine a renewed diplomatic strategy in the aftermath of Singapore and Hanoi? Would the dysfunction in the UN Security Council after the Russian invasion of Ukraine force us to consider a different approach to sanctioning the DPRK should they conduct another nuclear test?

Finally, the three allies should discuss together the changes in the regional military balance since then. Today, much of the discussion about the possibility of a regional crisis that might escalate

to the use of force involves tensions across the Taiwan Strait. How does each ally view these tensions? What, if any, roles would the U.S. expect of its allies in Tokyo and Seoul? What changes in the U.S. force posture in NE Asia might result if a crisis were to erupt?

### **U.S. Goals for the Trilateral**

From a U.S. perspective, these two alliances are indispensable. Article 5 obligations require integrated deterrence in both alliances. Beyond that, the U.S. military must access its facilities in both nations to maintain its forward deployed posture. Several concerns shape U.S. policy towards the U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral agenda. The first is the state of bilateral ties between Japan and South Korea. While hopeful that bilateral ties between Tokyo and Seoul will improve, the U.S. remains alert to difficulties in resolving complex political issues (such as how to handle the South Korean Supreme Court decision on forced labor) and the potential for these issues to slow or even interrupt security cooperation.

Second, the U.S. looks to its allies to bolster their defenses to enhance allied deterrence. A considerably more robust Japanese investment in defense capabilities is expected to be announced later this year. The ROK, too, continues to enhance defense spending. Both allies are considering enhancing their long-range strike capabilities as well as their indigenous military technologies. Discussion among the three allies on the role of conventional strike capabilities in their defense planning and on how they envision these capabilities will enhance allied deterrence will go a long way to ease concerns about a regional arms race.

Finally, as noted above, a shared understanding among the three allies on China and the potential for Beijing to use force against Taiwan might offer insights into if and how threat perceptions in these alliances are changing. While each ally will undoubtedly see such aggression as having a differing impact on their own security, important to create shared understanding of concerns and dynamics that could affect allied security should such a crisis emerge. Relatedly, important to work through what impact rising tensions across the Taiwan Strait could have on North Korean behavior.

### **The Impact of Russia's War in Ukraine**

Russian aggression against Ukraine has created a new level of concern across the globe about the stability of the postwar war norms regarding the use of force. This type of blatant aggression against a neighboring nation raises multiple concerns for U.S. allies in Asia. Both Japan and South Korea depend on the U.S. for defense assistance. Can the U.S. manage a war in Europe while also managing growing tensions in Asia? The parallel most often made in Asia is to Chinese aggression against Taiwan. What lessons do Japanese and Korean leaders think China has drawn from Russia's war?

China's use of military or economic coercion creates a higher risk for U.S. allies than for the U.S. The specter of a nuclear conflict has re-emerged as Russia has openly threatened to introduce

weapons of mass destruction in Ukraine. Nuclear coercion is a serious risk for non-nuclear allies, even in a crisis. China could threaten the use of nuclear weapons against the U.S. homeland to deter intervention in any use of force against Taiwan. Similarly, China could threaten U.S. allies with aggression should they cooperate with the United States. This may affect Japanese thinking about their choices in a cross-Strait conflict more given the likelihood of U.S. forces using Japanese bases during such a conflict. Proximity to China, of course, matters here when it comes to the threat of using military force. But Japan and the ROK could feel more vulnerable to Chinese economic coercion that singles them out compared with the power China might have to grapple with when it faces a multinational coalition such as NATO.

### **U.S.-Strategic Competition and the Trilateral**

The relationship between the U.S. and the PRC will undoubtedly shape the policies of all three members of the U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral. The U.S. has identified China as a strategic competitor, but the nature of that competition continues to evolve. Will it resemble a Cold War division and a disentanglement of economic ties? Will it be designed successfully to avoid military conflict but maintain a less risky but still mutually beneficial form of economic engagement? To be sure, U.S. relations with China will depend on how Beijing responds to Russian aggression.

Other short-term decisions could also shape the trajectory of U.S.-China strategic relations. A North Korean nuclear test would reveal whether China was willing to abandon its longstanding opposition to the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Pyongyang. Conversely, should Beijing want to align with Washington in response to the nuclear test via the UN Security Council or other diplomatic efforts, this situation could also open the door to improved ties. Another influence will be the future of trade tariffs. Should Beijing and Washington find a way to reduce economic frictions, that could also offer an avenue for reducing tensions.

But the effort at reimagining economic resilience in the face of deeper strategic antagonism between the U.S. and its allies and China, Russia and others is likely to continue. To date, both Tokyo and Seoul have stated their interest in working with the U.S. and others to deepen supply chain resilience and in cooperating to advance technology innovation. Both Japan and the ROK were founding members of Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). The QUAD and its working groups offer opportunity for Japan and South Korea to align with US on future priorities for strategic competition with China. Both are critical to any coalition strategy that aims to deepen economic security and resilience.

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## **US-Japan-ROK trilateral Track II**

By SOEYA Yoshihide

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### **Japan and Trilateral Security Cooperation**

I have long advocated a somewhat unconventional (to me, realistic) analytical perspective with which to look at the geopolitical environment in Northeast Asia; Japan and South Korea (or the Korean Peninsula) are surrounded by the United States, China and Russia, the three strategically independent great powers. From this perspective, one can see that Japan and South Korea are similarly situated, share common agenda items and interests, and should work together for stability and peace of the region and the world.

This is also why both Japan and South Korea cannot have a comprehensive strategy without the alliance with the United States, making trilateral security cooperation a natural and effective mechanism in coping with regional and global challenges. Naturally, therefore, the US-Japan alliance and the US-ROK alliance need to be coordinated much more effectively.

For this to happen, bilateral relations between Japan and ROK need to be normalized. There now appears to be a will in both Tokyo and Seoul under the new administrations, but there are the usual obstacles, i.e., emotional detachment over historical disputes among the peoples and complex domestic politics on both sides.

Japan and the ROK also face China through the Japan-China-ROK (CJK) framework of cooperation. Perhaps this framework could be upgraded to a mechanism of confidence-building over the long run. Japan and the ROK thus jointly represent a critical juncture, facing both the United States and China through two different trilateral schemes.

### **The Implications of the Russian War Against Ukraine for Security and Stability in Asia**

I would think the invasion of Ukraine by Russia is essentially an imperial war. The United States, EU and NATO, and other advanced democracies are resisting this in the name of defending a rules-based international order. Working with the advanced western democracies has become critical for both Japan and South Korea to sustain and minimize the damage to the rules-based international order. Prime Minister Kishida Fumio and President Yoon Suk-yeol attending the NATO summit in late June was indeed a good start for a Kishida-Yoon global partnership.

Chinese motives in East Asia (including Taiwan and Senkaku) and beyond appear to also be motivated by sentiments somewhat reminiscent of Chinese imperial lust to recover the past glory. This should be the fundamental basis of “sympathy” of China toward Russia. Needless to say, China is watching the development of the Russian war as a “test case” from which to learn lessons, and its aftermath should have huge implications for Chinese calculations and behaviors.

All this would mean that the challenges posed by China will be quite long term, and our coping strategy should also be comprehensive and long term, combining both deterrence and diplomacy.

### **Japan's Relations with China in a Trilateral Context**

Geopolitically, Japan is positioned at an unusual place which no other country may wish to replace, facing China, Russia, the Korean Peninsula so closely, and the United States across the Pacific. With a grave mistake of national strategy before WWII in mind, postwar Japan has tried to stabilize relations with both the United States and China simultaneously. Needless to say, the strategic relationship between the United States and China has been the most critical external factor affecting Japan's diplomatic maneuvering.

There are indications that the Kishida administration is inclining toward this traditional foreign policy of postwar Japan. Domestic discourses and politics in Japan, however, have now become quite conservative and anti-China. As is observed by many, the upper house election on July 10 was expected to be a critical turning point for Kishida to start the difficult process of breaking the shackles of conservative politics in and out of the LDP. The assassination of Abe Shinzo on July 8, however, appears to have made this process much more murky and complex.

Nonetheless, somewhat ironically, the influence of emotionalism in Japanese conservative politics is stronger vis-à-vis the ROK than toward China. In this sense, restoring diplomacy toward China may be less difficult than with the ROK. After all, since around 2018, Abe himself had become flexible in his China policy.

### **On New Relations Between Japan and the ROK**

Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio often emphasizes himself as the leader of the Kochi-kai, a dovish faction of the LDP. One can reasonably assume that the political orientation of Kishida is liberal and internationalist, which is demonstrated by his commitment to global denuclearization and to a global role as a member of G7 in coping with the Ukraine crisis.

South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol is regarded as a conservative leader in the context of South Korean politics, but beyond the Korean Peninsula, his diplomatic agenda appears also liberal and internationalist.

Somehow, the chemistry between a Japanese liberal leader and a Korean conservative leader is much more harmonious than that between a Japanese conservative and a South Korean liberal. Thus, logically and rationally (i.e., emotions aside), recent leadership changes in Tokyo and Seoul should provide ample room for improvement and innovation in Japan-South Korea relations as well as trilateral cooperation involving the United States.

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