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The Institute for Peace and Unification Studies
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US-ROK POLICY BRIEF

2024-Dec. ISSUE 4

INSTITUTIONALIZING
US-ROK-JAPAN TRILATERAL COOPERATION:
RECENT PROGRESS AND
FUTURE PROSPECTS

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INSTITUTIONALIZING US-ROK-JAPAN TRILATERAL COOPERATION: RECENT PROGRESS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

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December 2024

Over the past two years, there has been dramatic progress in cooperation among the Republic of Korea (hereafter “Korea”), Japan, and the United States. Trilateral cooperation was essentially dormant at the beginning of 2022, due in large part to severe tensions in Korea-Japan relations over a series of historical, legal, economic, and territorial matters. However, since that time, the three countries have launched a joint agenda that has spurred over 50 trilateral meetings on issues ranging from security and economics to women’s empowerment and people-to-people ties.

How did this striking change come about, and what lies ahead for trilateral relations as political leadership changes across the three countries? This article argues that US-ROK-Japan cooperation was central to the Biden administration’s vision for a latticework-style regional institutional architecture and that important steps have been

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taken by all three countries to resuscitate and institutionalize trilateral relations, which are now on a stronger footing. Although domestic political shifts may lead to increased uncertainty in the future, shared concerns will continue to push the three countries together, and the efforts of the last two years will help to mitigate future tensions among them, primarily by offering more institutional channels for consultation, coordination, and cooperation that can be utilized during difficult times.

Why Trilateral?

Since the end of World War II, the US-led system of alliances has been the most formal aspect of the security architecture of the Asian region. These alliances have been characterized by a “hub-and-spokes” structure of bilateral relationships centered on the US, in contrast to the multilateral North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance structure that emerged in Europe. When the Biden administration came into office in 2021, one of its major aims was to strengthen the network of American allies and partners, transforming it from the hub-and-spokes system to a “[latticework](#)” of relationships interconnecting countries with each other on a more flexible basis. Given the importance of the US-Japan and US-Korea alliances in dealing with challenges such as an increasingly assertive China and North Korea, strengthening this set of trilateral relationships was one of its highest priorities. There had been [short-lived attempts](#) at trilateral cooperation in the past, but the time seemed ripe to try again.

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The trilateral format has several potential advantages for Korea, Japan, and the US. First, there may be substantive gains from cooperation; working trilaterally may better leverage limited resources and effort across the three countries, which is increasingly important as transnational challenges grow more complex. Second, it helps to reduce the risk that other countries can use tensions between any pair of countries to sow divisions among the trio; the trilateral format can help them to stay focused on pursuing their shared interests and values. Third, trilateral cooperation among a small group of like-minded countries can be more targeted and nimble than would be possible in larger multilateral institutions like the United Nations or the World Trade Organization. For this reason, other small “minilateral” groupings like the Quad or AUKUS have also become more prominent in recent years.

Fourth, Korea, Japan, and the US can potentially use the trilateral format in tandem with other minilateral and multilateral institutions to help them coordinate their positions and amplify their impact in the Asian region and

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beyond. For example, the three countries have discussed aligning their efforts within initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, the Partners in the Blue Pacific, the Minerals Security Partnership, the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, and the Global Net-Zero Government Initiative. [Japan](#) and

[Korea](#) have also recently stepped up their partnership with NATO, participating in three summits, several foreign ministerial meetings, and even a defense ministerial meeting. Japan and Korea’s engagement with NATO is a visible sign of how the European and [Indo-Pacific partners](#) of the US are becoming increasingly interconnected and how they are considering far-reaching impacts of crises such as the war in Ukraine. Korea, Japan, and the US have also repeatedly emphasized their support for the rules-based international order, as well as for the ASEAN-led regional architecture.

The Road to Trilateral Cooperation

In February 2022, despite an atmosphere of chilly Korea-Japan relations, the Biden administration explicitly identified expanding trilateral cooperation with Japan and Korea as one of the most important items in its [Indo-Pacific Strategy](#). The opportunity for action came when Korean President Yoon Suk-Yeol took office in May 2022. Yoon clearly signaled a desire to improve relations with Japan, and the three governments acted quickly. The [first trilateral leaders’ meeting](#) in over four years was held by Biden, Yoon, and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida in June 2022 in Madrid on the sidelines of the NATO Summit, and the second was held in November 2022 in Phnom Penh on the sidelines of ASEAN-related meetings. Their [Phnom Penh Statement](#) laid out a set of shared concerns and a commitment to “work in a trilateral format at all levels of government to implement [their] approaches to the Indo-Pacific” across issues such as security, economics, and climate change. Further improvements in Korea-Japan relations were made possible by the Yoon government’s announcement that it would create a foundation to compensate Korean plaintiffs who had won lawsuits against Japanese companies over forced labor during Japan’s colonial rule—a move that was [controversial](#) in Korea but [well-received](#) in Japan.

These steps paved the way for the August 2023 Camp David Summit, which set out an ambitious agenda with 31 deliverables and launched a flurry of over 50 trilateral meetings during the following 15 months.

These steps paved the way for the August 2023 [Camp David Summit](#), which set out an ambitious agenda with 31 deliverables and launched a flurry of [over 50](#) trilateral meetings during the following 15 months. The intense pace of dialogue has been matched by its impressive scope, which has involved separate trilateral meetings of leaders, foreign ministers,

defense ministers, national security advisors, commerce and industry ministers, finance ministers, and counterparts across other issue areas. These efforts have yielded several concrete results.

To begin with, trilateral relations have been jumpstarted with a high-level, comprehensive strategic agenda. The current vision for trilateral cooperation extends well beyond Korea, Japan, and the US and even beyond the Indo-Pacific region, which makes sense when one considers that the impacts of the shared challenges [identified](#) by the three countries—e.g., geopolitical competition, economic security, the climate crisis, Russia’s war against Ukraine, nuclear proliferation—are not confined to specific geographic borders. Moreover, many of these shared challenges will require these governments to mobilize tools that cross traditional boundaries between issues like economics and

security and to consider whole of government approaches to “[integrated deterrence](#)” that are much more complex to coordinate. The articulation of the broad interests and values that unite Korea, Japan, and the US is critical to driving future-oriented cooperation.

In addition, there have been [substantive outcomes](#) across multiple issues. Security cooperation has expanded through trilateral multi-domain military exercises, growing defense engagements and exchanges, and increased information sharing. Efforts have been made to strengthen ballistic missile defense capabilities and to institutionalize cooperation among defense authorities, and a new Trilateral Maritime and Law Enforcement Cooperation Framework has been announced. Economic security has also been a major focus, with outcomes such a supply chain early warning system and a Disruptive Technology Protection Network aimed at “[keeping sensitive technology out of the wrong hands.](#)” Other areas of cooperation include development and humanitarian assistance initiatives and programs to train technology leaders, empower women economically, and foster people-to-people ties.

Last but not least, the cumulative impact of these activities has been to institutionalize trilateral cooperation across a striking breadth of policy domains, solidifying a network of government-to-government ties that will serve as a resource for future collaboration. This has been further solidified by the [announcement](#) of a new Trilateral Secretariat responsible for

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coordinating and implementing their shared commitments. This unprecedented move will create an organization focused specifically on trilateral cooperation, helping to ensure that they can build upon their current momentum regardless of shifts in domestic or international politics. The three governments have committed to convening various trilateral meetings among leaders and ministers annually moving forward.

Future Prospects

The rapid pace of trilateral institutionalization was partly driven by the concern that there might only be a short window of opportunity before potential leadership changes led to less favorable domestic political circumstances—a prediction that may be quickly becoming reality. On October 1, Kishida resigned as prime minister, and Japan’s Liberal Democratic Party-Komeito coalition lost its majority in the Lower House election on October 27, leaving it in a weakened position. On November 5, Kamala Harris lost the US presidential election to Donald Trump, prompting widespread predictions of a more unilateral American foreign policy less friendly to allies and partners. On December 3, Yoon imposed martial law in Korea only to lift it hours later due to intense opposition from the parliament and the public, leading lawmakers to immediately file a motion to begin impeachment proceedings against him. As a result, all three leaders behind recent efforts to promote cooperation among Korea, Japan and the US will likely soon be out of office, and [some observers](#) have already speculated that this may negatively impact the trilateral.

Despite recent developments, however, there are reasons to think that trilateral cooperation will continue over the long term. First, the shared concerns that brought these three countries together will persist. The composition of trilateral cooperation may change as economics becomes a more contentious arena under a second Trump administration, but there is still broad scope and need for the three countries to work together. For example, factors such as US-China competition will remain structural features of the international environment, regardless of shifting domestic political dynamics.

Second, recent changes in Japanese and American leadership do not necessarily bode ill for trilateral cooperation, though developments in Korea are more ambiguous. In the case of Japan, the broad direction of foreign policy is unlikely to change significantly because there is widespread support for Japan's [Free and Open Indo-Pacific](#) vision, which shares many of the goals of US-ROK-Japan trilateral cooperation. In the US, there is bipartisan [consensus](#) that China is its biggest challenge, which suggests that Japan and Korea will remain crucial allies, even if the tone of the Trump administration becomes more critical and transactional. Some of Trump's policy advisors have already [claimed](#) that he will continue supporting trilateral cooperation. In Korea, Yoon's expected departure raises the most questions: if he resigns or is removed from office, a new leader may be less enthusiastic about their predecessor's trilateral initiatives and more focused on ongoing disputes with Japan, but that remains to be seen.

These new trilateral mechanisms should be viewed as ways to ensure that dialogue continues—not only to consolidate areas of agreement but also to genuinely engage with areas of disagreement.

Third, recent efforts have created a more robust multi-level, multi-issue network of institutional channels for consultation, coordination, and cooperation than previously existed, creating an organizational basis for trilateral cooperation that is more likely to survive any particular set of leaders. It is inevitable that there will be ups and downs in US-

ROK-Japan relations in the future, but these new trilateral structures can help to mitigate and manage tensions even if leader-level ties become fraught, enabling working-level dialogue to continue during the difficult times when it is most needed. Aside from the tumult expected from the Trump administration, the legacies of Japanese colonial past in Korea will continue to raise [thorny challenges](#). Trilateral cooperation is sometimes seen as something that is only possible if such disputes are ignored, but this approach leads to brittle diplomatic outcomes. Instead, these new trilateral mechanisms should be viewed as ways to ensure that dialogue continues—not only to consolidate areas of agreement but also to genuinely engage with areas of disagreement. In sum, the US-ROK-Japan trilateral is now a more well-established feature of the evolving regional and global institutional architecture—it is up to these three governments to decide whether and how to use this new diplomatic tool moving forward.

The US-ROK Policy Brief is a joint publication between The George Washington University Institute for Korean Studies (GWIKS) and the Seoul National University Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (IPUS) dedicated to exploring current Korea-related policy matters within regional and global contexts.

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