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Securing the future of US–Japan–South Korea cooperation

How to strengthen the trilateral
partnership and maintain
stability in the Indo-Pacific

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Summary

- Trilateral cooperation between the US, Japan and South Korea in the Indo-Pacific is vital to check North Korean adventurism and manage China’s increasing assertiveness in the region, especially across the Taiwan Strait. Without strong cooperation between the US and its allies, it will prove difficult for any of the three countries to uphold deterrence in the region and keep the balance of power in their favour.
- At Camp David on 18 August 2023, US president Joe Biden, Japanese prime minister Fumio Kishida and South Korean president Yoon Suk Yeol agreed on a bold strategic vision for the development of trilateral cooperation. This initiative was driven by a closer alignment of the countries’ perceptions of the threat to regional stability from China and North Korea, the presence of leaders in each of the three countries who were deeply invested in the idea of trilateral partnership, and increasingly receptive domestic audiences.
- However, two years on, that vision is already under threat. Changes of leadership in all three countries since 2023 may have eroded the political will that previously drove cooperation forward. US president Donald Trump’s preference for bilateralism in dealing with China and North Korea, the inconsistency of his demands regarding increased burden-sharing from Japan and South Korea, and his administration’s economic protectionism could all undermine the Camp David consensus. These concerns have only been heightened by the publication of the administration’s National Security Strategy in late 2025, which references China largely as an economic competitor. Meanwhile, bilateral relations between Japan and South Korea have become fragile due to uncertainty over the direction of political leadership in Tokyo and Seoul.
- Trilateral cooperation in its current form is not an inevitability. It is the product of decades of concerted diplomacy and strategic focus that have enabled the US, Japan and South Korea to look beyond past grievances and misalignments. Continued political will at multiple levels and careful calibrations are needed to ensure that cooperation develops and thrives despite domestic and international pressures.
- From this point, trilateral cooperation can take one of three pathways. First, one (or more) of the three leaders could actively damage relations by disparaging the cooperative framework. Second, trilateral cooperation could continue at the same intensity as the past few years. Both these paths are unlikely for a variety of reasons explored in our paper. A third, and more realistic, outcome is that working groups and convenings below the leadership level continue to function and help to strengthen the ‘connective tissue’ of trilateral cooperation without top-level involvement.
- This paper argues that the three countries must now try to maximize their partnership within the limits of this realistic third scenario. Specifically, their efforts should focus on:
 - a) **Updating the vision and purpose of trilateral partnership to reflect the current US administration’s priorities.** Japan and South Korea must promote the trilateral as a tool to keep the US engaged in the

region, in recognition of the importance of its presence. The purpose of the trilateral should not just be to uphold a free, open and prosperous Indo-Pacific, but also to maintain the existing regional power balance in favour of the three partners, and to enable greater burden-sharing through increased interoperability and integration with the US, which in turn allows for greater US power projection. The countries must rethink the role of ‘values’ such as democracy promotion as coalescing factors and instead focus on securing shared interests and clear benefits to the economies of each country.

- b) **Advancing institutionalization.** In the absence of top-level meetings, policymakers and officials at lower levels must drive cooperation and ensure that the achievements made at Camp David can be sustained. To ensure continued engagement at the working level, officials should focus on the delivery of symbolic goals in the medium term, with the long-term aim of preserving and bolstering the existing framework of cooperation with revamped messaging to suit the domestic priorities of the three countries. In the short term, policy officials can continue working-level cooperation in areas where there are convergences, pushing the importance of the trilateral integration from bottom–up.
- c) **Delivering tangible ‘wins’ in specific sectors to demonstrate the practical benefits of cooperation in:**
 - i) **Defence and security.** The three countries can still deepen ties without a strict alignment of threat perceptions. Ways of achieving this aim could include enhancing the mechanism for data-sharing on missile launches; establishing formal connections at the operational level between the two bilateral alliance structures; working to provide capacity-building assistance in maritime security to Southeast Asian and Pacific Island countries; establishing a crisis communication mechanism between the national security agencies or foreign ministers; and continuing to hold joint discussions and table-top exercises.
 - ii) **Economic security and technology.** To mitigate the challenges to economic security cooperation from increasing protectionism, tariffs and uncertainty of economic policies, the three countries should institutionalize the Trilateral Economic Security Dialogue and the Trilateral Export Control Dialogue with biannual meetings. They should also explore cooperation in areas such as critical minerals and shipbuilding. (The bilateral agreements signed by Trump with both South Korean president Lee Jae-myung and Japanese prime minister Sanae Takaichi in October 2025 are promising with regard to these areas.)

Introduction

Trilateral cooperation between the US, Japan and South Korea is critical for securing peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. Deeper cooperation allows the US and its allies to maintain deterrence against China and North Korea, to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific and uphold the regional security order.

However, a series of domestic and international challenges could cause progress to stall. Changes of government in all three countries could diminish the political will that enabled the deepening of cooperation at the Camp David summit of August 2023: US president Donald Trump’s mercurial attitude towards allies, South Korean president Lee Jae-myung’s perceived animosity towards Japan earlier in his political career, and Japan’s shift to the right following Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi’s election in late 2025 all imperil the progress achieved in recent years. The alignment of threat perceptions regarding China and North Korea that allowed for deeper cooperation may also now diverge. Both the structural and the personal factors that facilitated trilateral cooperation over the past few years are now in doubt.

Box 1. A guide to the Camp David agreement of August 2023

Strong commitment by the former heads of state of the US, Japan and South Korea – Biden, Kishida and Yoon – coupled with an alignment of perceptions regarding the threat posed by China and North Korea, culminated in the historic summit of Camp David on 18 August 2023. At that summit, the three leaders vowed to deepen their partnership on security and defence, broaden cooperation in economic security and technology, and position the trilateral grouping as a provider of public goods for the stability of the Korean peninsula, the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.

The document that emerged from the summit, titled ‘the Spirit of Camp David’,¹ featured four priority areas of cooperation. Those areas, and the key elements of each, are detailed below.

1. Convergence of threat perceptions and a ‘commitment to consult’

The convergence of threat perceptions in the Biden–Yoon–Kishida era allowed for one of the most remarkable outputs at Camp David: a formal commitment to consult (CtC), under which the three countries committed ‘to coordinate responses to regional challenges, provocations, and threats affecting collective interests and security’.² While falling short of a full military alliance, the CtC was a recognition of intertwined security of the countries, with the hope, at least from the US side, that one day there would be full convergence. In many ways, the CtC has laid the foundation for a ‘quasi-alliance’ between the three.³

¹ The White House (2023), ‘The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States’, press release, 18 August 2023, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/the-spirit-of-camp-david-joint-statement-of-japan-the-republic-of-korea-and-the-united-states>.

² Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2023), *Commitment to Consult*, <https://japan.kantei.go.jp/content/000133678.pdf>.

³ Interview conducted by the author.

2. Connecting the bureaucracies to institutionalize trilateral partnership

The Camp David agreement mandated annual convenings of the heads of state and ministers of the three countries in a range of formats. Since then, leaders, ministers and bureaucrats from the three countries have met at least 80 times through more than 20 different channels, spanning multiple layers of government and military (see Table 1).

These discussions focused on coordinating responses to regional security issues, enhancing ties in economic and technological security and delivering public goods in the region. This approach marked a significant shift in the nature of trilateral cooperation, moving it away from single-issue talks, towards a broader agenda to be delivered from a ‘whole-of-government’ approach.

3. Deepening partnership in defence and security

At Camp David, the three countries took unprecedented steps to deepen partnership in defence and security. The US’s alliances with Japan and South Korea still operate independently of one another for the most part.⁴ However, the three countries have come to recognize the interconnectivity of common threats and acknowledge that those threats may necessitate joint responses or, at the very least, some coordination. Even though a formal common defence pact is unlikely anytime soon, the three countries have established mechanisms that can form a basis for deeper security ties in future.

First, the countries created a trilateral **real-time missile warning data-sharing mechanism**, which became operational in January 2024 and has continued since.⁵ This system allows information on detections of missile launches around the Korean peninsula to pass through a common platform at the US INDOPACOM headquarters in Hawaii in real time.

Second, the three countries committed to holding an **annual, named multi-domain trilateral military exercise** called ‘Freedom Edge’. This exercise has taken place twice to date.⁶ This trilateral exercise represents a step forward in military collaboration, as it allows for trilateral interoperability. Other exercises are trilateral in name, but in essence involve the US conducting exercises bilaterally with its allies separately in the same space at the same time.

Third, the three countries affirmed the importance of increasing information sharing through the setting up of a **three-way communication system**. There was also an effort to set up a crisis hotline among the three foreign ministries or the national security agencies that could help communicate in real-time. However, it could not be implemented due to lack of adequate funding and delays in the bureaucratic processes.⁷ One such line exists between the defence ministries, but is not enough to coordinate a joint response in case of a crisis.

⁴ Johnstone, C. and Hornung, J. (2023), ‘Separate U.S. Alliances in East Asia Are Obsolete’, *Foreign Policy*, 11 September 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/11/japan-south-korea-us-alliance-china-security-east-asia-defense-geopolitics-biden-kishida-suk-yeol>.

⁵ Mahadzir, D. (2023), ‘U.S., Japan, South Korea Establish North Korean Missile Warning System, Trilateral Exercises’, USNI News, 19 December 2023, <https://news.usni.org/2023/12/19/u-s-japan-south-korea-establish-north-korean-missile-warning-system-trilateral-exercises>.

⁶ US IndoPacific Command (2024), ‘Japan, ROK, US Conduct Second Exercise Freedom Edge’, press release, 18 July 2024, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/NEWS/Article/3962934/japan-rok-us-conduct-second-exercise-freedom-edge>.

⁷ Interview conducted by the author.

Fourth, the three countries created the **Trilateral Maritime Security and Law Enforcement Cooperation Framework**, a framework to provide joint capacity-building assistance to partners in the Indo-Pacific.⁸ They wanted to streamline the delivery of capacity-building assets to allow for interoperable systems and to deconflict the delivery of similar assets in order to build deterrence by resilience among the countries. They also conducted their first-ever trilateral coastguard drill under this mechanism.⁹

Fifth, the military leaders of the three countries began to meet more regularly, meeting at least three times in 2023, after a hiatus of four years.¹⁰ The meetings were institutionalized under the **Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework** that sought to enhance policy consultations, information-sharing, trilateral exercises and defence exchange and cooperation among the three.¹¹

Finally, the three countries have held multiple **table-top exercises**, some of which involved discussions on how to ‘deter and respond, based on various threats on the Korean peninsula and in the Indo-Pacific region’.¹² The inclusion of the Indo-Pacific region here indicates sensitivity over other conflicts in the region, notably in the Taiwan Strait, that had been avoided in the past. Previous table-top exercises concerning North Korea have involved discussion of other regional scenarios, including in the Taiwan Strait, signalling a big shift from the past.¹³ However, these exercises featured no joint contingency planning.

4. Broadening partnership to economic security and technology

The US, Japan and South Korea agreed to build ‘robust cooperation in the economic security and technology spheres, leveraging the unique capabilities that each of our countries brings to bear’.¹⁴

To that end, first, they created specific avenues for the convening of ministers and officials working on finance and trade issues. The intention of these mechanisms was to align export controls, private-sector partnerships, international standards development, critical and emerging technologies and critical minerals. The commerce and industry ministers and finance ministers of the three countries have met at least once, at separate instances.¹⁵ The Trilateral Economic Security Dialogue, which brought together national security officials from all three countries, has met at least four times

⁸ The White House (2024), ‘Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States’, press release, 15 November 2024, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/11/15/joint-statement-of-japan-the-republic-of-korea-and-the-united-states>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Curtis, L., Wright, E. and Kelley, H. (2024), *Forging a New Era of U.S.-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Cooperation*, report, Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/forging-a-new-era-of-u-s-japan-south-korea-trilateral-cooperation>.

¹¹ US Department of Defense (2024), ‘Japan, United States, Republic of Korea Trilateral Ministerial Joint Press Statement’, press release, 27 July 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3852146/japan-united-states-republic-of-korea-trilateral-ministerial-joint-press-statem>.

¹² US Department of Defense (2024), ‘United States–Japan–Republic of Korea Trilateral Ministerial Meeting (TMM) Joint Press Statement’, press release, 2 June 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3793913/united-states-japan-republic-of-korea-trilateral-ministerial-meeting-tmm-joint>.

¹³ Interview conducted by the author.

¹⁴ The White House (2023), ‘The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States’.

¹⁵ US Department of the Treasury (2024), ‘Japan-Republic of Korea-United States Trilateral Ministerial Joint Press Statement’, press release, 17 April 2024, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2264>; Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan (2024), ‘Joint Statement Japan-Republic of Korea-United States Commerce and Industry Ministerial Meeting’, press release, 26 June 2024, <https://www.meti.go.jp/press/2024/06/20240627005/20240627005-a.pdf>.

to promote engagement in critical and emerging technologies, supply-chain resilience and responses to economic coercion.¹⁶ The three countries also held a Trilateral Export Control Dialogue.¹⁷ (See Table 1.) These platforms allowed the countries to align policies on export controls, discuss pathways of collaboration and share best practices. This in turn helped to increase the breadth of cooperation to other sectors such as biotechnology, quantum, artificial intelligence and space. Some reports even indicated South Korea's desire to establish a 2+2+2 ministerial-level dialogue on economic security, although this has yet to happen.¹⁸

Second, they launched several initiatives such as the Minerals Security Partnership,¹⁹ the Resilient and Inclusive Supply-Chain Enhancement Partnership, the Disruptive Technology Protection Network and a supply-chain early warning system.²⁰ These initiatives were intended as ways to build resilient supply chains by sharing data on disruption early, diversifying supply chains for critical minerals and semiconductors, helping emerging markets to develop greater supply-chain resilience, discussing ways to maintain access to critical supplies in emergencies. Some of these initiatives worked in tandem with one another. The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, a multilateral effort to promote secure, resilient and green supply chains, tried to create a central node to coordinate activity. But it is unclear what specific steps the three countries took under the initiatives to advance their economic security beyond consultations.

Third, the three countries explored joint opportunities for research and innovation in critical and emerging technologies. At Camp David, the three leaders pledged funds to strengthen trilateral scientific collaboration and innovation in fields such as advanced computing, AI, materials research and climate and earthquake modelling.²¹ The leaders also encouraged businesses in their countries to invest in critical facilities in the other countries.

Finally, the countries committed to jointly shaping global norms and standards on the adoption of certain technologies and economic practices. For instance, in the field of AI governance, the trilateral partners agreed to promote AI rules that emphasize safety, trust, innovation and inclusivity following the May 2024 AI Summit in Seoul.²² They agreed to set technical standards for new industries like 6G telecommunications, autonomous systems and green technologies to ensure that they reflect open and transparent standards of democratic models.²³

¹⁶ Govella, K. (2025), 'U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateral Engagement on Economic Security: Disentangling Resilience, Competitiveness, and Protection', *Asia Policy*, 20(1), pp. 28–32, <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2025.a951451>.

¹⁷ Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan (2024), 'METI Joined Japan-US-ROK Export Control Dialogue', 22 February 2024, https://www.meti.go.jp/english/press/2024/0222_003.html.

¹⁸ See remarks by Victor Cha in Center for Strategic and International Studies (2023), 'Previewing the Camp David Trilateral Summit', press briefing, 14 August 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/previewing-camp-david-trilateral-summit>.

¹⁹ The Minerals Security Partnership is a US-led initiative that also involves countries other than Japan and South Korea, such as Australia and Canada, as well as the European Commission.

²⁰ The White House (2023), 'Fact Sheet: The Trilateral Leaders' Summit at Camp David', 18 August 2023, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/fact-sheet-the-trilateral-leaders-summit-at-camp-david>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² KBS World (2024), 'S. Korea, US and Japan Hold 4th Economic Security Dialogue', 6 June 2024, https://world.kbs.co.kr/service/news_view.htm?lang=e&Seq_Code=185895#:~:text=with%20a%20government%20pact%20on,that%20was%20clinched%20in%20April.

²³ Shepardson, D. (2024), 'U.S., Japan, South Korea Vow Strategic Cooperation, Boost Security, Economies', Reuters, 27 June 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-japan-south-korea-vow-strategic-cooperation-boost-security-economies-2024-06-27/#:~:text=The%20ministers%20said%20in%20a,cybersecurity%20and%20technical%20standard%20setting>.

Despite the goodwill and convergence of interests, the success of trilateral cooperation has always been contingent on multiple domestic and external factors. This moment shows why.

Domestic political changes across the three countries, especially the US, have changed the outlook dramatically. Dialogue and deliberations as measures to build trust and confidence between countries, and gradually align perceptions and policies between partners, have become an unwelcome proposition. Instead, a more transactional view of international relations is taking hold.

Partnerships such as this one now need to demonstrate immediate, tangible ‘wins’ for domestic consumption. This shift means rethinking both the strategic messaging around and vision behind trilateral cooperation, reshaping its institutional framework and focusing on key deliverables – particularly in the areas of defence and security, and economic security – to ensure that trilateral cooperation can succeed despite the scale of challenges.

This paper demonstrates how officials and policymakers can adapt to this shift to keep trilateral cooperation on the agenda. The paper argues that the US–Japan–South Korea partnership is critical for upholding peace, stability and order in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. It goes on to analyse the factors that enabled the Camp David agreement in 2023, before taking stock of the layers of cooperation built among the three countries since then. It outlines the key challenges facing the current framework of cooperation and, finally, makes recommendations to policymakers in Washington, Tokyo and Seoul on how to advance trilateral cooperation despite those challenges.

The paper is based on more than 40 interviews with current and former government officials, scholars and policymakers across the three countries, as well as a private roundtable discussion held at Chatham House in June 2025.

Trilateral cooperation is crucial for maintaining peace and security in the Indo-Pacific

Trilateral cooperation has historically focused on managing security threats from North Korea and emerging tensions with China, while ensuring that Japan and South Korea – two of the US’s strongest allies – can deepen defence and security ties to preserve the balance of power in the region in their favour.

Close cooperation between the three is critical for maintaining deterrence against North Korea. Kim Jong Un’s regime poses a grave threat to international peace and stability. It continues to develop both its nuclear arsenal and its long-range missile systems, the latter of which could strike countries as far as 3,500 miles away.²⁴ North Korea has a history of using brinkmanship, especially towards Japan and South

²⁴ Howell, E. (2024), *North Korea and Russia’s dangerous partnership: The threat to global security from the Kim–Putin axis and how to respond*, research paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/12/north-korea-and-russias-dangerous-partnership>.

Korea. It has also recently strengthened military cooperation and signed a mutual defence treaty with Russia, assisting Russia in its war on Ukraine, and threatening European security.

Deeper US–Japan–South Korea trilateral cooperation would allow the three countries to share military resources and intelligence assessments, and enhance joint capabilities in response to North Korean provocations. While the US–South Korea alliance is focused entirely on securing South Korea against the Kim regime in the North, the US–Japan alliance is aimed at maintaining peace in the Indo-Pacific region more broadly. The coordination of these two alliances in a trilateral format is crucial to check and respond to threats from North Korea, as Pyongyang threatens the security of all three countries at the same time.

Closer defence and security cooperation between the US, Japan and South Korea would send strategic signals to China of the West’s resolve to uphold the status quo in the Indo-Pacific.

Trilateral cooperation is also a vital element of US-led efforts to preserve the regional balance of power against a more assertive China. The rise of China’s economic and military capability has long-term implications for regional and global security. Beijing’s increasing territorial assertiveness in the Yellow Sea²⁵ and East China Sea²⁶ directly affects the sovereignty of South Korea and Japan, respectively. Meanwhile, China’s provocative actions across the Taiwan Strait and in the South China Sea, its use of unfair economic practices domestically and globally, its employment of cyber espionage, and active undermining of the rules-based international order are also seen as threats to regional and global security. Closer defence and security cooperation between the US, Japan and South Korea would send strategic signals to China of the West’s resolve to uphold the status quo in the Indo-Pacific.²⁷ Alongside the military aspect, open cooperation on economics and technology is needed to compete with China’s growing heft in those areas. Through strengthened alliances and minilateral cooperation, Washington and its allies can match the scale of Chinese power.²⁸

²⁵ Yoon, D. and Wang, J. (2025), ‘The Yellow Sea Is the New Flashpoint for China’s Regional Power Play’, *Wall Street Journal*, 3 July 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/world/asia/the-yellow-sea-is-the-new-flashpoint-for-chinas-regional-power-play-5af7e8b5>.

²⁶ Chubb, A. (2024), *The East China Sea Dispute: China’s and Japan’s Assertiveness from Mao to Xi*, paper, New York: Asia Society Policy Institute, <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/east-china-sea-dispute-chinas-and-japans-assertiveness-mao-xi>.

²⁷ Flake, L. G., Mitchell, D. J., Park, Y-H and Watanabe, T. (2002), *Strengthening U.S.–ROK–Japan Trilateral Relations*, report, Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/media/csis/pubs/uskoreajapantrilatwg.pdf.

²⁸ Campbell, K. M. and Doshi, R. (2025), ‘Underestimating China’, *Foreign Affairs*, 10 April 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/underestimating-china>.

China, North Korea and Russia are enhancing their own economic and military cooperation – as seen at the September 2025 ‘Victory Parade’ in Beijing attended by Kim and Russian president Vladimir Putin – and the nature of the threat to US and allied interests is becoming more sophisticated, with transfers of missile technology, defence equipment and even troops.²⁹

Coalitions such as the US–Japan–South Korea trilateral can build synergies and institutional arrangements between allies that can surpass the scale of cooperation among adversaries and thereby maintain deterrence. These coalitions can provide other countries in the region, such as those in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands, resources for their own economic growth and development, helping them become more resilient against external threats from state and non-state actors.

Minilateral partnerships also make it easier for states to solve collective action problems, such as climate change, global health and terrorism, overcoming a lack of capacity and efficacy of other multilateral arrangements in the Indo-Pacific and worldwide. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Quadrilateral Security Partnership (Quad) of the US, Australia, India and Japan delivered vaccines to nations throughout the Indo-Pacific region.³⁰

By deepening security and defence ties, the US, Japan and South Korea can enhance interoperability, increase coordination among their militaries and even draw plans for coordinated responses in case of active threats to the regional status quo. In doing so, they will raise the costs of any belligerent action by Beijing or Pyongyang, and potentially increase the chance that the regional balance of power holds. The consequences of any such action by China or North Korea in the Indo-Pacific – whether in the Taiwan Strait or the South and East China Seas – would destabilize the world. US–Japan–South Korea trilateral cooperation is vital to ensure that such a situation does not come to pass.

What are the main factors behind trilateral cooperation?

In August 2023, the three countries inaugurated a ‘new era’ of cooperation at the Camp David summit. President Biden, President Yoon and Prime Minister Kishida outlined a new strategic ‘vision’ that recognized that the security of their countries was interconnected, and sought to institutionalize their partnership, deepen cooperation in security and defence and broaden it to include economic and technology security.

Since then, the trilateral mechanism has encouraged the normalization of Japan–South Korea ties, enabled Seoul to play a fuller role in the region, and led to greater strategic alignment in policies on China and North Korea. In just

²⁹ Howell (2024), *North Korea and Russia’s dangerous partnership*.

³⁰ India Ministry of External Affairs (2022), ‘Inaugural delivery of Covid Vaccines under the Quad’s Vaccine Partnership,’ press release, 2 April 2022, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/35188/Inaugural_delivery_of_Covid_Vaccines_under_the_Quads_Vaccine_Partnership.

two years, officials have met at least 80 times across all levels of government.³¹ Additional dialogues have also taken place on strengthening economic, financial, technological and people-to-people exchanges.

These developments were driven by three factors in particular. First, the three countries aligned on both the degree and level of priority given to threat perceptions regarding China and North Korea, and shared a common outlook on the way to check those threats. All three countries have published their own Indo-Pacific strategy documents, which include similar strategic outlooks and visions for the region. For example, having long been reluctant to take on a greater role in regional security, South Korea published its first Indo-Pacific strategy in 2022.³² In these documents, the countries all recognized the imperative for deeper integration to preserve the regional balance of power in their favour.

Russia’s war on Ukraine has forced the leaders to reckon with the increasing interconnectivity of threats posed by a nascent alliance between China, North Korea and Russia, and the need for a coordinated response.

For the US, trilateral cooperation allowed for partnering with allies as ‘force multipliers’ to project US power in the region.³³ For Japan and South Korea, it offered a way to keep the US engaged in East Asia, while reinforcing ties with one another. Japan, in particular, has emphasized constructing a multi-layered security architecture in the Indo-Pacific.³⁴ Moreover, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has brought war to the fore as an instrument of foreign policy, forcing countries to prioritize national security above everything else. It was no coincidence that at the G7 summit in March 2023, Kishida stated that ‘Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow’.³⁵ Russia’s war also forced the leaders to reckon with the increasing interconnectivity of threats posed by a nascent alliance between China, North Korea and Russia, and the need for a coordinated response.

Second, the individual leaders of the three countries at the time of the Camp David summit were deeply invested in the idea of trilateral partnership. Driven by a commitment towards alliances as the way to win the strategic competition with China, Biden urged Japanese and South Korean counterparts at multiple instances to meet with him at a trilateral summit.³⁶ Meanwhile, Yoon took steps

³¹ Kanodia, K. (2025), ‘The Unpromising Future of Japan–South Korea–US Trilateral Cooperation’, Chatham House Expert Comment, 20 February 2025, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/02/unpromising-future-japan-south-korea-us-trilateral-cooperation>.

³² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea (2022), ‘Introducing the Indo-Pacific Strategy’, press release, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/wpge/m_26382/contents.do.

³³ Campbell and Doshi (2025), ‘Underestimating China’.

³⁴ Cabinet Secretariat (2022), *National Security Strategy of Japan*, Tokyo: Cabinet Secretariat, nss-e.pdf.

³⁵ The Office of the Prime Minister of Japan (2023), ‘Message from Prime Minister KISHIDA Fumio on the G7 Hiroshima Summit’, press release, 31 March 2023, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101_kishida/statement/202303/_00018.html.

³⁶ Interview conducted by the author.

to promote bilateral ties between South Korea and Japan, including the resolution of historical issues (including financial reparations for forced labour of Korean citizens during the Second World War) and the rolling back of trade restrictions. Just as crucially, Kishida was willing to respond favourably. At certain instances, Yoon and Kishida asked the US to allow their two countries to talk without US mediation – representing a break from the recent past.³⁷ These developments were critical in creating a new strategic vision for cooperation and encouraging the three countries’ bureaucracies and other stakeholders to forge deeper partnerships.

Finally, the domestic political environments in the US and Japan were conducive to trilateral integration. The Biden administration entered office with a strong will to maintain US hegemony in the Indo-Pacific through allied cooperation.³⁸ To deal with the strategic competition with China, Biden officials tried to create a ‘latticework of cooperation’ in the region through a ‘self-reinforcing’ coalition of allies.³⁹ The rationale was to forge multilateral groups to allow allies to cooperate on issues over which there was an alignment of interest, while gently nudging them to move closer over issues of diverging perceptions.⁴⁰ Unlike before, the strategic vision of trilateral cooperation under Biden was not just to optimize coordination on specific issues, but more importantly to push for broad cooperation among the three actors. The shift from issue-specific coalitions to actor-specific coalitions enabled the countries involved to develop a broad strategic vision, integrate capacities and play bigger roles in upholding security in the region.

A receptive domestic environment in Japan was critical for the success of this policy. Kishida’s party held a majority in both houses of parliament, and was willing to increase cooperation with South Korea.⁴¹ In South Korea, despite domestic opposition, Yoon and his right-wing People Power Party (PPP) have historically also believed in strengthening ties with the US, increasing coordination with Japan and enhancing deterrence against North Korea. Public polling shows that the PPP’s voter base views Japan more favourably than voters for other parties and is receptive to efforts aimed at improving ties.⁴²

Up to the Camp David summit, the domestic and international reinforced one another, allowing for a deepening of existing cooperation, especially on matters related to North Korea, and broadening to new avenues of cooperation, especially with regards to economics and technology. Even though the three countries diverged on certain matters, especially over the prioritization of security threats

³⁷ Interview conducted by the author.

³⁸ The White House (2022), *Indo-Pacific Strategy*, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>; Blinken A. J., Austin, L. and Sullivan, J. (2024), ‘Biden’s Indo-Pacific diplomacy has made America’s future more secure’, *Washington Post*, 5 August 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/08/05/blinken-austin-sullivan-biden-indo-pacific-military-economic>.

³⁹ Sullivan, J. (2023), ‘The Sources of American Power’, *Foreign Affairs*, 24 October 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/usa/sources-american-power-biden-jake-sullivan>.

⁴⁰ Interview conducted by the author.

⁴¹ Sakata, Y. (2021), ‘The U.S.–Japan–ROK Trilateral in the Indo-Pacific Era: Strategic Alignment or Still in Flux?’, The Asan Forum Open Forum, 28 June 2021, <https://theasanforum.org/the-us-japan-rok-trilateral-in-the-indo-pacific-era-strategic-alignment-or-still-in-flux>.

⁴² Sohn, Y. (2025), *The Public Prioritizes a Future-oriented Cooperation over Resolving the History Problem in Korea–Japan Relations: 2025 EAI Public Opinion Poll on East Asia*, briefing, Seoul: East Asia Institute, https://www.eai.or.kr/eng/press/press_01_view.php?no=10246.

from China, trilateral cooperation was not intended to lead to a complete overlap of threat perceptions and strategic prioritization. Nonetheless, the converging interests allowed for an expansive framework of cooperation.

What are the obstacles to further progress?

Since 2023, a series of challenges have emerged that could rupture trilateral cooperation in its current form. The changes of government in the US in January 2025, South Korea in June 2025, and Japan in October 2025 have eroded some of the political will of the Biden–Kishida–Yoon era.

President Trump’s preference for bilateralism and fixation on shifting the burden-sharing in US’s alliances make it unclear how much he values minilaterals as a tool in the US’s strategic competition with China.⁴³ Trump routinely accuses allies of unfairly taking advantage of the US, does not appear to believe in collective solutions to security challenges, and seemingly prefers to deal with China and North Korea directly and in person – all of which undercut the principles behind trilateralism.

Trump’s capriciousness has eroded the first factor driving the US, Japan and South Korea closer together – namely their common perception of the threat from China and North Korea. On China, Trump has vacillated between treating the country as the US’s greatest threat across all domains of security and the economy, and seeking a grand rapprochement with Chinese president Xi Jinping by conceding US advantages and strategic resolve.⁴⁴ The trade ‘truce’ between him and Xi, agreed in Busan, South Korea, in October 2025, temporarily delayed trade confrontations. But, while the US sought to accommodate Chinese demands in Busan, it was busy coercing other countries, like Cambodia and Malaysia, to not enter into agreements that would jeopardize US security interests, ostensibly with an eye towards China.⁴⁵ References to China in the new US national security strategy, published in December 2025, follow a similar pattern. On North Korea, even though Trump has yet to make any policy decisions, the record of his first term as president suggests that he will prefer bilateral deals with the Kim regime over a collective approach.

The Trump administration has demanded that Japan and South Korea take on greater financial responsibility for their defence, with Washington reportedly asking Tokyo and Seoul to meet a target of 5 per cent of GDP on defence spending.⁴⁶ Officials from the Department of Defense (recently renamed the Department of War) are pushing US allies to clarify its roles in the event of a war with China over Taiwan.⁴⁷ The Pentagon is also considering restructuring US forces in South

⁴³ Kanodia, K. (2025), ‘US Indo-Pacific allies are unhappy about Trump’s defence demands. But they have to comply’, Chatham House Expert Comment, 14 July 2025, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/07/us-indo-pacific-allies-are-unhappy-about-trumps-defence-demands-they-have-comply>.

⁴⁴ *Le Monde* (2025), ‘Trump’s Incoherent China Policy’, 13 August 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2025/08/13/trump-s-incoherent-china-policy_6744337_23.html.

⁴⁵ Foster, P., Walker, O. and Lakshmi, A. (2025), ‘US adds ‘poison pills’ to Asia trade pacts to counter China’, *Financial Times*, 6 November 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/73f2dc53-b222-4244-b503-ef00e31b501e>.

⁴⁶ Kim, H. Y. and Tong-Hyung, K. (2025), ‘South Korea’s New President Lee Vows to Pursue Talks with North and Bolster Ties with US and Japan’, Associated Press, 4 June 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/south-korea-president-lee-a754f6c7fe8f44d15e2898b59b9a5f3c>.

⁴⁷ Sevastopulo, D. (2025), ‘US demands to know what allies would do in event of war over Taiwan’, *Financial Times*, 12 July 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/41e272e4-5b25-47ee-807c-2b57c1316fe4>.

Korea to focus on China rather than North Korea, and drawing down troop numbers by 4,500.⁴⁸ Tokyo is also concerned that the Pentagon may halt an agreed plan to move 4,000 US Marines from Okinawa, overturning a deal signed in 2013 after local residents opposed the US military presence on the island.⁴⁹

Trump’s insistence on shifting manufacturing activity back to the US will make it harder for the three countries to find common ground on matters of economic security.

On the economic front, Trump has imposed a 15 per cent tariff on all exports from Japan and South Korea to the US (with exceptions for certain sectors) – a decision that has shocked many in Tokyo in particular, which considers itself a model ally for the US, but received a basic tariff rate that is 5 percentage points higher than that imposed on the UK. Trump’s insistence on shifting manufacturing activity back to the US will also make it harder for the three countries to find common ground on matters of economic security, especially as initiatives involving friend-shoring and co-production come into question. Furthermore, a raid by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents at a Hyundai factory in Georgia and the subsequent detention of more than 300 South Korean workers has enraged the South Korean population and politicians, with the reliability of US as an ally being openly questioned as a result.⁵⁰ This raid also highlighted the contradictions between Trump’s immigration policy and his desire to bring manufacturing back to the US, as the US does not issue enough visas to allow enough workers and technicians to enter the country to set up such factories.⁵¹ As long as the bilateral alliances remain in flux around these issues, trilateral relations cannot deepen further.

In June 2025, South Korea elected a left-leaning politician, Lee Jae-myung, as its president.⁵² Despite having been a vocal critic of Yoon’s pro-Japan policies in opposition, Lee has since shown an inclination to continue the policy of rapprochement. Since assuming office, he has called for the strengthening of cooperation with Japan, while holding separate discussions over historical issues.⁵³ Significantly, Lee’s first foreign visit as president was to Tokyo. This was the first such visit by a South Korean president since the two countries normalized

⁴⁸ Youssef, N. A., Ward, A. and Martin, T. W. (2025), ‘U.S. Considers Withdrawing Thousands of Troops from South Korea’, *Wall Street Journal*, 23 May 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/world/asia/u-s-considers-withdrawing-thousands-of-troops-from-south-korea-725a6514?msocid=28e6f3bb6f7761a73e0de6b56b776a7a>.

⁴⁹ Fackler, M. (2025), ‘U.S. Marines Start to Leave Japan, Decades Behind Schedule’, *New York Times*, 18 February 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/18/woFor inrld/asia/us-marines-japan-okinawa.html>.

⁵⁰ Rashid, R. (2025), ‘South Korea outraged at 300 workers treated as ‘prisoners of war’ in US raid’, *Guardian*, 12 September 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/sep/12/south-korean-outrage-at-us-detention-ordeal-as-300-workers-return-home>.

⁵¹ Kim, J. and Jin, H. (2025), ‘US to allow South Koreans to work at sites under temp visas, but clear solution elusive’, *Reuters*, 1 October 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-says-it-encourages-south-korean-investment-meeting-worker-visas-2025-09-30>.

⁵² DraudtVéjares, D. (2025), *The Transformation of South Korean Progressive Foreign Policy*, paper, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/05/the-transformation-of-south-korean-progressive-foreign-policy?lang=en>.

⁵³ Sneider, D. (2025), ‘Hopeful First Steps in KoreaJapan Relations Under Lee JaeMyung’, Korea Economic Institute of America ‘The Peninsula’ blog, 22 June 2025, <https://keia.org/the-peninsula/hopeful-first-steps-in-korea-japan-relations-under-lee-jae-myung>.

relations in 1965. However, it remains to be seen if this ‘dual diplomacy’ approach persists, not least because the potential for friction has increased from the other side of the relationship.

In Japan, the resignation of Shigeru Ishiba in September 2025 led to the election of Sanae Takaichi as leader of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and subsequently as prime minister.⁵⁴ Takaichi has previously been less apologetic over Japan’s colonial history in the region and, like her mentor Shinzo Abe, has visited the Yasakuni shrine, which serves as the memorial site for some of Japan’s leaders during the Second World War, who were later convicted as war criminals by an international tribunal.⁵⁵ Although Takaichi declined to visit Yasakuni during talks over government formation,⁵⁶ the more assertive foreign policy and nationalistic tendencies of her government risk stoking tensions with South Korea and setting back the progress made on cooperation.

The reasons for rapprochement under the leadership of Kishida and Yoon – common strategic interests, democratic values and the desire to uphold the rules-based international order – remain unchanged. However, cooperation between Japan and South Korea has always been susceptible to domestic grievances, especially in a deeply polarized South Korea. Progressive governments in Seoul have tended to focus on historical issues, while conservative governments have prioritized cooperation, causing fluctuation in relations between the two countries. For instance, in 2012, South Korea pulled out of the signing of the General Security of Military Information Agreement, an intelligence-sharing agreement with Japan, due to domestic tensions. The agreement was eventually signed in November 2016, but was terminated in 2019 before restarting again in 2023.⁵⁷

Progressive governments in Seoul have tended to focus on historical issues, while conservative governments have prioritized cooperation, causing fluctuation in relations between South Korea and Japan.

Even though the strategic imperative for trilateral cooperation remains the same, the extent to which any of the three countries involved will consider trilateral cooperation an essential tool for achieving these goals remains unclear.

But there are some positive signs. Despite a slow-down in institutionalization continuing into the second Trump administration, the three foreign ministers

⁵⁴ Suzuki, K. (2025), ‘Sanae Takaichi sees herself as the successor to Shinzo Abe. But changes in Japan’s politics present big challenges’, Chatham House Expert Comment, 22 October 2025, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/10/sanae-takaichi-sees-herself-successor-shinzo-abe-changes-japans-politics-present-big>.

⁵⁵ Bass, G. J. (2023), *Judgement at Tokyo: World War II on Trial and The Making of Modern Asia*, Basingstoke: Pan Macmillan.

⁵⁶ *Straits Times* (2025), ‘Japan’s PM hopeful Sanae Takaichi avoids war shrine visit amid political wrangle’, 17 October 2025, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/japans-sanae-takaichi-sends-offering-to-tokyo-war-shrine>.

⁵⁷ Suzuki, T. and Inada, K. (2023), ‘S. Korea Notifies Japan of ‘Normalization’ of GSOMIA Pact’, *The Asahi Shimbun*, 22 March 2023, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14867174>.

met in Munich in February, in Brussels in April and in Kuala Lumpur in July, signalling a continued desire for engagement.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, some of the working-level mechanisms, such as the Trilateral Coordinating Secretariat managing board, the Defence Trilateral Talks (DTT), the meeting of the joint chiefs of staff and the meeting of the vice foreign ministers have also continued,⁵⁹ while the three militaries have held trilateral exercises.

In the absence of an expansive, permanent secretariat, trilateral cooperation is in reality comprised of a bundle of such policies and meetings, held together by joint commitments and political will. The crucial question whether the momentum behind institutionalization from the Biden–Kishida–Yoon era can be sustained amid the growing uncertainties.

As middle-power democracies neighbouring a seemingly hostile superpower, Japan and South Korea have a clear strategic interest in working together to keep the US invested in the region, as they aim to prevent any unilateral coercive changes and uphold some kind of rules-based order. Ties between Japan and South Korea have historically been stronger when both countries fear abandonment by the US, especially in a harsh external security environment.⁶⁰ The external security environment in East Asia has only worsened since Camp David, due to increased Chinese military and economic assertiveness, growing military and defence cooperation between North Korea and Russia, and the ‘no limits’ partnership between China and Russia. To underline the gravity of the situation, the 2025 edition of Japan’s annual defence white paper refers to it as the ‘greatest trial since the end of World War II’.⁶¹

There are signs that leaders in Tokyo and Seoul grasp this strategic imperative. During a bilateral summit in August 2025, President Lee and Prime Minister Ishiba promised a ‘future-oriented’ partnership and pledged to put aside historical grievances.⁶² Prime Minister Takaichi has kept up the momentum so far, seeking to strengthen ties with South Korea in a meeting with Lee on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in October 2025.⁶³ Both leaders have so far sidestepped discussing historical issues, in favour of a pragmatic bilateral relationship.

⁵⁸ Bruce, T. and Office of the Spokesperson for the US Department of State (2025), ‘Secretary Rubio’s Trilateral Meeting in Kuala Lumpur with Japanese Foreign Minister Iwaya and Republic of Korea First Vice Foreign Minister Park’, press release, 11 July 2025, <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/07/secretary-rubios-trilateral-meeting-in-kuala-lumpur-with-japanese-foreign-minister-iwaya-and-republic-of-korea-first-vice-foreign-minister-park>.

⁵⁹ Ministry of Defence of Japan (2025), ‘Japan–U.S.–Republic of Korea Defense Trilateral Talks Working Group Meeting and TTX’, press release, 23 April 2025, <https://www.mod.go.jp/en/article/2025/04/789f039a65cf318f53cd6bc596e59a41224e6a63.html>; Office of the Spokesperson for the US Department of State (2025), ‘Convening of the U.S.–Japan–ROK Trilateral Coordinating Secretariat Managing Board’, press release, 19 May 2025, <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/05/convening-of-the-u-s-japan-rok-trilateral-coordinating-secretariat-managing-board>; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2025), ‘Japan–U.S.–ROK Trilateral Vice Foreign Ministerial Meeting’, press release, 18 July 2025, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/pressite_000001_01460.html.

⁶⁰ Cha, V. D. (1999), *Alignment Despite Antagonism: The United States–Korea–Japan Security Triangle*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

⁶¹ Ministry of Defence of Japan (2025), *2025 Defense of Japan Pamphlet*, https://www.mod.go.jp/j/press/wp/wp2025/pdf/DOJ2025_Digest_EN.pdf.

⁶² Johnson, J. and Ninnovagi, G. (2025), ‘At meeting rich in symbolism, Ishiba and South Korea’s Lee agree to steadily build ties’, *Japan Times*, 24 August 2025, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/08/24/japan/politics/south-korea-japan-ishiba-lee-summit>.

⁶³ Park, J-M (2025), ‘South Korea’s Lee, Japan’s Takaichi to strengthen ties, Lee’s office says’, Reuters, 30 October 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-koreas-lee-japans-takaichi-strengthen-ties-lees-office-says-2025-10-30>.

General domestic opinion in both countries is shifting, with more voters expressing positive attitudes towards cooperation. This development owes much to generational shifts, increased people-to-people ties between the two countries and growing negative attitudes towards China in both countries. Recent public polling suggests that 52 per cent of Japanese respondents felt that their country had a positive relationship with South Korea, compared with 50 per cent in 2024.⁶⁴ More significantly, 54 per cent of South Koreans felt the same about relations with Japan in 2025, compared with just 42 per cent in 2024. For the first time since 1995, more than half of South Koreans believed that relations were in a good state.⁶⁵ Even though considerable gaps in outlook towards historical issues remain, there is a willingness among voters in both countries to find common ground.

Three possible ways forward

In light of the challenges described above, the future of trilateral cooperation remains uncertain. But three potential pathways can be identified.

First, one (or more) of the three leaders could actively damage trilateral cooperation by disparaging the cooperative framework. This path seems the least likely. Despite his broader grievances against multilateralism and unilateralism, President Trump has allowed unilateral formations in the Indo-Pacific to continue to function. At a meeting in February 2025, Trump and Ishiba reaffirmed the ‘importance of Japan-U.S.-RoK trilateral cooperation’.⁶⁶ There is also a bipartisan consensus in the US Congress in favour of trilateral cooperation on the Indo-Pacific, as evidenced by the introduction of a bill for enhancing inter-parliamentary cooperation between the three countries.⁶⁷

Elsewhere, some observers fear that, despite their recent rhetoric, President Lee and Prime Minister Takaichi could inflame tensions between their countries over unresolved historic issues. However, as mentioned above, both leaders have pledged to maintain economic and security cooperation, and reaffirmed their support for the trilateral since taking office.⁶⁸ Successful visits to Japan and the US by Lee would also seem to confirm the pragmatic turn in his foreign policy, in particular. Accordingly, the chances of any of them seeking to damage or abandon the partnership are low.

The second, most optimistic pathway – in which the trilateral partnership continues with the same level of intensity as in previous years – also seems unlikely. The level of commitment displayed by the three former leaders no longer exists at the top level. Biden pushed for a trilateral leader-level summit in almost every bilateral

⁶⁴ The Yomiuri Shimbun via *Japan Times* (2025), ‘Survey: 52% in Japan, 55% in South Korea Say Relations Are Positive; Japan Cautious Over New S. Korean President’, 25 June 2025, <https://japannews.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/politics-government/20250625-265822>.

⁶⁵ Hankook Ilbo via *Korea Times* (2025), ‘More than half of Koreans say Korea-Japan ties are good for first time: survey’, 25 June 2025, <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/southkorea/society/20250625/more-than-half-of-koreans-say-korea-japan-ties-are-good-for-first-time-survey>.

⁶⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2025), *United States-Japan Joint Leaders’ Statement*, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100791691.pdf>.

⁶⁷ US Congress (2025), ‘H.R.3429 – US-Japan-ROK Trilateral Cooperation Act’, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/3429/text> (accessed 24 Nov. 2025).

⁶⁸ Pacheco Pardo, R. (2025), ‘What to Expect From South Korea’s New President’, *Foreign Policy*, 5 June 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/06/05/south-korea-president-election-results-lee-jae-myung-foreign-policy>.

meeting with the heads of Japan and South Korea.⁶⁹ Yoon was deeply convinced of the need to improve South Korea’s ties with Japan for a variety of reasons, both personal (such as the influence of his father) and strategic (particularly, the more threatening external security environment). Although their successors have acknowledged the strategic imperative, they have not yet shown a willingness to invest the same amount of personal capital.

One of the legacies of the 2023 Camp David summit is the recognition of the importance of trilateral cooperation among officials of all three countries.

Strong leadership is essential for setting a strategic vision and imbuing historically tense and complicated relationships with a positive spirit. Some of the actions taken by the three former leaders may have been purely symbolic. But symbolism is persuasive and, therefore, its value remains high. Without it, momentum will be difficult to sustain.

The third – and most likely – trajectory is that working groups and convening below the leadership level continue to function, and help to strengthen trilateral cooperation despite inertia from the top. One of the legacies of the 2023 Camp David summit is the recognition of the importance of trilateral cooperation among officials of all three countries, and the formation of mechanisms that can turn warm words and sentiment into practical action. Among the most significant of these mechanisms are the Indo-Pacific Dialogue, the coordination mechanism for the secretariat and the DTT. As such, cooperation can persist at lower levels of government to build on previous agreements – maybe even without defining any new outcomes.

Before Camp David, progress towards institutionalization was slow and trilateral meetings were infrequent. The process started in the 1990s with a coordination mechanism to co-manage common security threats from North Korea.⁷⁰ But only in 2008 did this channel evolve into an assistant-secretary-level mechanism as the DTT, which continues to date. The first trilateral meeting of foreign ministers took place in 2010, prompted by a desire for closer economic cooperation, as well as increased North Korean provocations and political changes in Japan.⁷¹ Eventually, the heads of state of the three countries held summit meetings in 2014 and 2016, as the US tried to mediate ties between Japan under Shinzo Abe and South Korea under Park Gyun-hye under President Barack Obama’s ‘Pivot to Asia’ strategy.

⁶⁹ Interview conducted by the author.

⁷⁰ Lee, C. M. (2018), *Prospects for U.S.–South Korean–Japanese Trilateral Security Cooperation*, report, Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Prospects_for_US-South_Korean-Japanese_Trilateral_Security_Cooperation.pdf.

⁷¹ Hosoya, Y. (2017), ‘A Japanese Perspective: The Korean Public and Limits of Trilateral Cooperation’, *Global Asia*, 12 (1), pp. 42–45, https://www.globalasia.org/v12no1/cover/a-japanese-perspective-the-korean-public-and-limits-of-trilateral-co-operation_yuichi-hosoya.

The salience of the external security environment as a coalescing factor became ever more apparent in the following years. Even though North Korea remained the primary focus, trilateral cooperation was increasingly framed in the context of other regional and global issues.⁷² The vice foreign ministers of the three countries began to hold regular meetings, discussing issues ranging from the South China Sea to climate change and cyber threats.⁷³ This wider discussion then allowed for lower-level diplomatic and military exchanges.

Camp David brought all these channels under a common framework, while also introducing new ones. Frequent meetings helped familiarize the three bureaucracies with one another, foster habits of cooperation and deepen mutual trust. Individual officials also became more familiar with the leaders' vision for the partnership. This shared endeavour created a sense of prioritization and fostered a desire for more connections across the three governments – strengthening what an interviewee for this paper referred to as the 'connective tissue' of partnership.⁷⁴ These connections also have the effect of increasing the cost of backtracking by any single country.

Talks on a formal political and diplomatic secretariat to serve as the coordination centre for the trilateral partnership began under President Biden, first becoming public in May 2024. These talks appear to have continued under President Trump, having stalled in the run up to the 2024 US presidential elections.⁷⁵ During the talks, the South Korean government had expressed a desire to host a permanent secretariat, which idea was resisted by the Japanese government. This disagreement led ultimately to the proposal of either a virtual secretariat or one rotating between the two capitals. A secretariat with rotational heads opened in November 2024, but its mandate and role remain unclear to date.⁷⁶

⁷² US Department of State (2016), 'Trilateral Cooperation Between the United States, Japan, and the Republic of Korea: Statement, Daniel R. Russel, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, House Foreign Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, Washington, DC', 27 September 2016, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2016/09/262489.htm>

⁷³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea (2016), 'Outcome of the 4th ROK–U.S.–Japan Vice Foreign Ministerial Meeting', press release, 15 July 2016, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=316780.

⁷⁴ Interview conducted by the author.

⁷⁵ US Department of State (2024), 'U.S.–Japan–Republic of Korea Trilateral meeting: Briefing, Kurt M. Campbell, Deputy Secretary of State, Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs Masataka Okano of Japan and Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs Hong Kyun Kim of Republic of Korea, Washington, DC' 31 May 2024, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/briefings-foreign-press-centers/trilateral-press-briefing>; Office of the Spokesperson for the US Department of State (2025), 'Convening of the U.S.–Japan–ROK Trilateral Coordinating Secretariat Managing Board'; interview conducted by the author.

⁷⁶ Theresia, M. (2024), 'Trilateral Secretariat office with US, Japan opened in Seoul', Korea.net, 21 November 2024, <https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/policies/view?articleId=262019>.

Table 1. Top-level meetings have largely stalled, but some lower-level channels continue to function well

Dialogue	Level	Expected frequency of meetings	Most recent meeting
Heads of state	Heads of state	Annual	15 Nov. 2024 ⁷⁷
Foreign ministers	Ministerial	Annual	11 Jul. 2025 ⁷⁸
Trilateral Ministers Meeting (TMM) of defence ministers	Ministerial	Annual	28 Jul. 2024 ⁷⁹
Commerce and industry ministers	Ministerial	Annual	26 Jun. 2024 ⁸⁰
Finance ministers	Ministerial	Annual	17 Apr. 2024 ⁸¹
National security	Advisers	Annual	25 Oct. 2024 ⁸²
Indo-Pacific Dialogue	Assistant-Secretary of East Asian and Pacific Affairs/Special Representative for Indo-Pacific/Deputy Minister/Dir-Gen., Foreign Policy Bureau	Annual	11 Dec. 2024 ⁸³
Foreign vice ministers	Vice-ministerial	Unspecified, but met at least twice a year under Biden presidency	18 Jul. 2025 ⁸⁴
Assistant Secretary-level meeting	Assistant Secretary of East Asian and Pacific Affairs	Unspecified	Unclear
Defense Trilateral Talks (DTT)	Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy or Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs/Deputy Minister for National Defense Policy/Dir-Gen. for Defense Policy	Unspecified, but mostly annually since 2008	24 Apr. 2025 (together with table-top exercises) ⁸⁵

⁷⁷ The White House (2024), ‘Remarks by President Biden, Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru of Japan, and President Yoon Suk Yeol of the Republic of Korea in Trilateral Meeting, Lima, Peru’, 15 November 2024, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2024/11/15/remarks-by-president-biden-prime-minister-ishiba-shigeru-of-japan-and-president-yoon-suk-yeol-of-the-republic-of-korea-in-trilateral-meeting-lima-peru>.

⁷⁸ Bruce and Office of the Spokesperson for the US Department of State (2025), ‘Secretary Rubio’s Trilateral Meeting in Kuala Lumpur with Japanese Foreign Minister Iwaya and Republic of Korea First Vice Foreign Minister Park’.

⁷⁹ US IndoPacific Command (2024), ‘Japan, United States, Republic of Korea Trilateral Chiefs of Defense – Joint Press Statement’, press release, 28 July 2024, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/NEWS/Article/3855980/japan-united-states-republic-of-korea-trilateral-ministerial-joint-press-statem>.

⁸⁰ Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan (2024), ‘Joint Statement Japan-Republic of Korea-United States Commerce and Industry Ministerial Meeting’.

⁸¹ US Department of the Treasury (2024), ‘Japan-Republic of Korea-United States Trilateral Ministerial Joint Press Statement’.

⁸² The White House (2024), ‘Joint Readout of the Trilateral National Security Advisors Meeting between the United States, the Republic of Korea, and Japan’, press release, 25 October 2024, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/10/25/joint-readout-of-the-trilateral-national-security-advisors-meeting-between-the-united-states-the-republic-of-korea-and-japan>.

⁸³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2024), ‘The Second Japan-U.S.-ROK Trilateral Indo-Pacific Dialogue’, press release, 11 December 2024, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/pressite_000001_00810.html.

⁸⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2025) ‘Japan-U.S.-ROK Trilateral Vice Foreign Ministerial Meeting’, press release, 18 July 2025, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/pressite_000001_01460.html#:~:text=On%20July%2018%2C%20commencing%20at,the%20United%20States%20of%20America%2C.

⁸⁵ Yonhap via *Korea Times* (2025), ‘South Korea, U.S., Japan Hold Trilateral Tabletop Exercise against North Korea Threats’, 24 April 2025, <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/foreignaffairs/20250424/south-korea-us-japan-hold-trilateral-tabletop-exercise-against-north-korea-threats>.

Dialogue	Level	Expected frequency of meetings	Most recent meeting
Special representatives on North Korea	US special representative for the DPRK/ Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs/Dir-Gen. for Asian and Oceanian Affairs	Unspecified, but met frequently between 2021 and 2023	20 Jul. 2023 (call held 19 Dec. 2023) ⁸⁶
Trilateral Diplomacy Working Group for Foreign Ministers Cooperation on North Korea's Cyber Threats	Deputy Special Representative for the DPRK/ Ambassador in charge of Cyber Policy and Deputy Dir-Gen. of Foreign Policy Bureau/ Dir-Gen. for the Korean Peninsula Policy	Unspecified, but met three times since the 2023 Camp David summit	6 Sep. 2024 ⁸⁷
Dialogue on Space Security	Unclear	Only once to date; no commitment to future meetings	8 Nov. 2023 ⁸⁸
Trilateral Dialogue on Development and Humanitarian Assistance Policy Dialogue	'Senior level'	Only once to date; no commitment to future meetings	30 Oct. 2023 ⁸⁹
US–Japan–South Korea Trilateral Coordinating Secretariat managing board	Deputy Assistant Secretary/Deputy Dir-Gen. for North American Affairs/ Deputy Dir-Gen. for Asian and Oceanian Affairs	Unspecified, but met twice to date	19 May. 2025 ⁹⁰
Trilateral chiefs of defence meeting (Tri-CHOD)	Defence chiefs	Unspecified, but met annually since 2014, with some breaks	11 Jul. 2025 ⁹¹
Naval chiefs meeting	Naval chiefs	Regular meeting	17 Apr. 2025 ⁹² (virtual)
Trilateral military exercises ('Freedom Edge')		Annual	18 Sep. 2025 ⁹³
Trilateral Economic Security Dialogue	National security agency officials	Unspecified	6 Jun. 2024 ⁹⁴

⁸⁶ Office of the Spokesperson for the US Department of State (2023), 'Joint Statement by the United States, the Republic of Korea, and Japan Special Representatives for the DPRK', press release, 6 April 2023, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/joint-statement-by-the-united-states-the-republic-of-korea-and-japan-special-representatives-for-the-democratic-peoples-republic-of-korea-dprk>.

⁸⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2024), 'The 3rd Japan- U.S.-ROK Trilateral Diplomacy Working Group for Foreign Ministry Cooperation on North Korea's Cyber Threats', press release, 6 September 2024, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/pressite_000001_00575.html.

⁸⁸ Office of the Spokesperson for the US Department of State (2023), 'Joint Statement on the Japan-ROK-U.S. Trilateral Dialogue on Space Security', press release, 8 November 2023, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-japan-rok-u-s-trilateral-dialogue-on-space-security>.

⁸⁹ US Embassy in the Republic of Korea (2023), 'Joint Statement on the Japan–Republic of Korea–United States Trilateral Development and Humanitarian Assistance Policy Dialogue', press release, 30 October 2023, <https://kr.usembassy.gov/110123-joint-statement-on-the-japan-republic-of-korea-united-states-trilateral-development-and-humanitarian-assistance-policy-dialogue>.

⁹⁰ Office of the Spokesperson for the US Department of State (2025), 'Convening of the U.S.–Japan–ROK Trilateral Coordinating Secretariat Managing Board'.

⁹¹ Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Public Affairs (2025), 'Republic of Korea-United States-Japan Trilateral Chiefs of Defense Joint Press Statement', press release, 11 July 2025, <https://www.jcs.mil/Media/News/News-Display/Article/4241083/republic-of-korea-united-states-japan-trilateral-chiefs-of-defense-joint-press>.

⁹² Minji, L. (2025), 'Naval chiefs of S. Korea, U.S., Japan discuss trilateral cooperation against N.K. threats', Yonhap, 17 April 2025, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20250417004300315>.

⁹³ US IndoPacific Command Public Affairs (2025), 'Freedom Edge 2025: Building Trilateral Trust Across the Indo-Pacific', press release, 18 September 2025, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/NEWS/News-Article-View/Article/4308520/freedom-edge-2025-building-trilateral-trust-across-the-indo-pacific>.

⁹⁴ KBS World (2024), 'S. Korea, US and Japan Hold 4th Economic Security Dialogue'.

Dialogue	Level	Expected frequency of meetings	Most recent meeting
Trilateral Export Control Dialogue	Assistant Secretary of the US Department of Commerce for Export Administration/ Trade Control Department, Japan Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry/Dir-Gen. for Trade Control Policy, Republic of Korea Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy.	Unspecified	22 Feb. 2024 ⁹⁵
Expert-level meetings	Various	Unspecified	
Calls in response to missile launches/tests from North Korea	Various	Unspecified	

Sources: Compiled by the author from a variety of sources, including the US Department of Defense, the US Department of State, US INDOPACOM, The White House, Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and South Korea’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The continuation of these lower-level meetings shows that policymakers in the three capitals can still optimize cooperation within the limited but realistic third scenario, and use existing channels to push for outcomes already envisaged at Camp David. The following section recommends a series of steps they can take towards those outcomes.

Recommendations

The ‘vision’ that emerged from Camp David in 2023 was unique in many aspects. It explicitly acknowledged the interlinked security of the three countries and gave special focus to institutionalization, seeking to insulate the partnership against dramatic political change. The agenda was also broadened to include new areas – such as disaster relief, humanitarian responses and development finance – to focus the partnership on providing benefits to each the three countries, and to others in the Indo-Pacific region.

This paper argues that the four areas of trilateral cooperation that emerged from Camp David can serve as a guide for policymakers and officials seeking to keep up the momentum amid the current challenges. The measures under each area can be tailored to the domestic priorities of each country.

1. Convergence of threat perceptions and a ‘commitment to consult’

The fundamental logic behind trilateralism – creating integrated deterrence to check China’s assertiveness and North Korean adventurism, while deepening ties among allies – remains unchanged. But the three governments are now focusing on different means and processes for achieving the ends. For this reason, the

⁹⁵ Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan (2024), ‘METI Joined Japan-US-ROK Export Control Dialogue’.

strategic rationale that has guided trilateral cooperation so far needs to be updated. A revised case must be made for the importance of trilateralism for all three countries, in a language that suits the domestic priorities of each.

Recommendation: Update the vision and purpose of trilateral partnership to reflect the current US administration’s priorities and asks.

Japan and South Korea must use the trilateral partnership as a platform to showcase themselves as able allies, willing to share the burden of maintaining deterrence in the Indo-Pacific. The emphasis on burden-sharing in the US National Security strategy published in December 2025 makes this all the more important.⁹⁶ They must emphasize that the trilateral enhances US power projection in the Indo-Pacific by allowing the US to send strategic, deterrent signals to China and North Korea through allied cooperation. Japan and South Korea have the resources and strategic alignment to shape the region in favour of the US, and therefore the trilateral partnership.

All three countries must rethink the role of values as the coalescing factor and instead focus on shared interests such as the maintenance of freedom of navigation and overflight in the Indo-Pacific. The Biden administration framed trilateral cooperation as a union of democracies in a global tussle with autocratic rivals. However, any future cooperation that continues to emphasize democracy in this way would not only come across as hypocritical, but could actively undermine the partnership’s credibility – not least due to President Yoon’s declaration of martial law in South Korea⁹⁷ and President Trump’s assault on democratic principles and values in the US.

A more equitable and sustainable partnership in the long term would benefit US, Japanese and South Korean interests. Emphasizing basic, shared interests will ground the trilateral in more consistent propositions that have broader appeal, both within the three countries and to other countries in the Indo-Pacific. A shift in emphasis would also create space for the three countries to cooperate with non-democracies in the region on specific, shared interests.

Finally, the trilateral partners must develop a core agenda focused on delivering tangible benefits to the three economies. That agenda should centre around defence and security, alongside other dimensions of economic security and technology. The agenda items must begin with issues where there is already a significant alignment, such as increasing interoperability among the three militaries and making supply chains more resilient. Given the sheer number of policy uncertainties in all three countries, focusing on a solid core will make their partnership more resilient against erratic changes of policy. Adding other items to the existing agenda, such as health and clean energy cooperation, would only open it up to more criticism.

⁹⁶ The White House (2025), *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.

⁹⁷ Mackenzie, J. (2025), ‘The unravelling of Yoon Suk Yeol: South Korea’s ‘stubborn and hot-tempered’ martial law president’, BBC News, 4 April 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c86py30qezvo>.

The vision must, therefore, put special emphasis on how trilateral cooperation is the most viable way to achieve integrated deterrence among the three countries, across the issues and areas that matter most to US, Japanese and South Korean national security interests.

2. Connecting the bureaucracies to institutionalize trilateral partnership

Bureaucratic enmeshing will likely be slowed down by the recent governmental changes in each country but not stopped entirely. Meetings of top-level leaders, especially at the head of state level, will become less frequent. While the foreign ministers of the three countries have met each other three times in 2025, others due to meet annually (including the respective national security advisers, and the ministers of defence, commerce and industry and finance) have yet to do so. Political uncertainty in South Korea during the first half of 2025 and the lack of bureaucratic capacity in the US were contributory factors. Nonetheless, these meetings are crucial to set the vision for cooperation on new agenda items, especially on areas where the three countries have previously been hesitant to coordinate.

Recommendation: Advance institutionalization through continued working-level cooperation on areas of convergence.

In the absence of regular top-level meetings and a lack of high-level political will, policymakers on all three sides need to drive cooperation and ensure that the higher baseline established since Camp David becomes self-sustaining. If the momentum of early 2025 were to continue, it could prevent the group from atrophying due to lack of political attention. Dialogue and deliberations will be of interest to all three countries, as it will keep them informed on the others' strategic thinking and provide critical information for operating in an increasingly uncertain world. An expansion of this kind of working-level exchange may even be the best-case outcome for trilateral cooperation.

To ensure continued engagement at the working level, the officials must focus on delivering symbolic victories in the medium term, with the overall goal of preserving and bolstering the existing framework of cooperation while revamping messaging to suit the domestic priorities of the three countries. In the short term, meanwhile, officials can continue working-level cooperation on areas of convergence like cybersecurity and military training, pushing the importance of trilateral integration from the bottom upwards.

There are, however, concerns about the potency of a grouping that would depend on lower-level working, without much top-down guidance, especially as the Trump administration continues to hollow out the US bureaucracy. Leader-level strategic guidance is necessary to signal continued commitment and prioritization. Nevertheless, officials from the three foreign ministries and militaries have continued to meet despite domestic uncertainty. These meetings must be used to indicate the importance of trilateral partnership to audiences in Washington,

Tokyo and Seoul. They must involve a broader set of stakeholders, including Japanese and South Korean civil society. Specific recommendations on how to achieve these goals include:

1. **Define and expand the mandate of the secretariat.** Even though a secretariat with a rotational head exists, its mandate remains unclear. The secretariat should take the lead in coordinating the various activities of the trilateral, setting its agenda and monitoring the delivery of projects. Since the trilateral spans multiple sectors, delivery of priorities requires cross-ministry collaboration both within and among the three countries. Officials recognize the limited capacity of their respective national bureaucracies to undertake a ‘whole-of-government’ approach without a central coordinating body.
2. **Continue to convene regular meetings at the working level to build trust and devise operational strategies,** without necessarily seeking a meeting of the heads of state. Diligent, behind-the-scenes diplomacy and joint work can help minimize disagreement over issues that may appear due to top-level policy divergence.
3. **Set an early date for the meetings of the three defence ministers and commerce/industry ministers.** These meetings are supposedly annual, but have yet to take place. Ministerial meetings are critical in advancing cooperation in functional areas of greatest convergence.
4. **Push for holding regular meetings of the different working groups, and set clear goals for each.** While high-level talks may be susceptible to the diplomatic climate in Washington, Tokyo and Seoul, lower-level exchanges can be helpful and productive in developing practical cooperation.

3. Deepening partnership in defence and security

Each of the steps outlined under this section of the Camp David vision (see Box 1) was driven by a common understanding of the degree and prioritization of threats from China and North Korea in the Indo-Pacific. The three leaders were able to enhance cooperation in areas where the three still had strategic convergence, although they did shy away from promoting cooperation on matters over which there were diverging perceptions – for instance, the reluctance of South Korea to take focus away from the Korean peninsula and ‘provoke’ China meant that table-top exercises did not focus solely on the Taiwan Strait or South China Sea.

Recommendation: Identify tangible ‘wins’ in defence and security to demonstrate the practical benefits of cooperation.

The future of security and defence ties among the three countries will depend on the alignment of threat perception and prioritization of those threats in the Indo-Pacific. Despite the current lack of alignment, the three countries should instead focus on deliverables that can still deepen defence and security ties, without necessarily requiring a strict alignment of threat perceptions. Specific recommendations are as follows:

- 1. Enhance the missile data-sharing mechanism by improving accuracy and expanding coverage.** Information-sharing on missile launches by North Korea has been a significant achievement of trilateral cooperation. Improving the quality of the information shared will directly benefit the national security of all three countries by checking North Korean adventurism. The three countries should continue upgrading technology to make information transfers more efficient, updating domestic legislation to make intelligence-sharing easier, and working to expand the geographic coverage of monitoring beyond the Korean peninsula.
- 2. Establish formal connections at the operational level between the two alliance structures.** Practical steps should include stationing liaison officers at the respective alliance commands in Seoul and Tokyo, and putting those at INDOPACOM headquarters in Hawaii in proximity.⁹⁸ At present, the US–South Korea and US–Japan alliances work independently of each other. Meanwhile, the degree of coordination between the liaison officers at INDOPACOM is unclear. Formalizing connections will enhance joint communication and collective response mechanisms in case of any contingency.
- 3. Provide capacity-building assistance in maritime security to Southeast Asian and Pacific Island countries under the Trilateral Maritime Security and Law Enforcement Cooperation frameworks.** Steps could include coastguard cooperation and training of officials, building on pre-existing networks and capacity. Japan has sought to enhance the security and deterrence capabilities of like-minded countries in the region, especially in Southeast Asia, through its Official Security Assistance (OSA) framework,⁹⁹ while the Yoon administration in South Korea sought to increase its engagement with the Pacific Islands.¹⁰⁰ The two countries can use these pre-existing capacities as a basis for coordinated efforts in the Indo-Pacific, demonstrating their willingness to share the burden with the US. Future projects could focus on enhancing maritime domain-awareness across the region by improving the intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities of like-minded nations.
- 4. Establish a crisis communication mechanism between the national security agencies or foreign ministries to allow for real-time exchanges of information.** The possibility of conflict spillovers in the region is increasing, making joint, coordinated responses even more important. Quick communication is crucial in a time of crisis. Under the Biden administration, talks of a crisis line of communication between the national security agencies of the three countries could not be completed. The three countries should pick up the discussions as a matter of urgency.

⁹⁸ Armitage, R. L. and Nye, Jr, J. S. (2024), *The U.S.–Japan Alliance 2024: Anchoring Stability in the Indo-Pacific*, report, Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2024-04/240404_Armitage_USJapan_2024.pdf?VersionId=PdawHvNzZEMSK4CJwzyh7AZ2Nbx_g7Th.

⁹⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2025), 'Official Security Assistance (OSA)', https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/ipc/page4e_001366.html.

¹⁰⁰ Sangarone, T. (2023), 'South Korea's Deepening Ties With Pacific Island States', *The Diplomat*, 26 September 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/09/south-koreas-deepening-ties-with-pacific-island-states>.

5. **Continue to hold trilateral discussions and table-top exercises to determine a tripartite response to a regional crisis.** Those discussions may not have to involve joint contingency planning. However, Japan and South Korea should not be seen by the US as mere ‘rear’ areas, especially since North Korean ballistic missiles can threaten all three countries simultaneously. By building informal coordination mechanisms for these dialogues to take place, the countries can eventually draw up plans for greater integration.

4. Broadening partnership to economic security and technology

Economic competition and coercion from China have compelled the US, Japan and South Korea to work collectively on issues such as supply-chain resilience and research and development.¹⁰¹ Through the steps identified in the Camp David vision, the three countries focused on enhancing mutual resilience and competitiveness with China.¹⁰² The extent to which the dialogues and mechanisms led to meaningful, actionable steps remains unclear for a variety of reasons. The time horizon for the realization of these mechanisms is longer than two years. Moreover, policies aimed at enhancing domestic competitiveness in one country can harm the competitiveness of others, including allies, as was seen with the allied discontent over Biden’s Inflation Reduction Act.¹⁰³ These obstacles have prevented a deepening of partnerships on economic and technology security.

Future cooperation on economic security and technology depends on the three countries overcoming the challenges highlighted above, along with new ones emerging as a result of the Trump administration’s economic policies. Under Trump, the US’s protectionist tendencies have only been accentuated. By some estimates, the average tariff rate in US trade has reached 20 per cent, as opposed to 2.5 per cent last year.¹⁰⁴ The erratic imposition of tariffs and the lack of exemption for allies have created a trust deficit between the US and Japan and South Korea, which jeopardizes the prospects for trilateral partnership on matters related to economic security and technology.

Cooperation on economic security was driven by a desire to ensure that the US and its allies retain prominence in these sectors over China. However, since taking office, the Trump administration has shown no consistent position on China when it comes to matters of economic security.¹⁰⁵ Such policy uncertainty need not necessarily be a barrier. In the short and medium terms at least, most of the cooperation on economic security and technology between the three countries will happen in bilateral settings. Nevertheless, opportunities for trilateral partnership still exist.

¹⁰¹ Curtis, Wright and Kelley (2024), *Forging a New Era of U.S.-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Cooperation*.

¹⁰² Govella (2025), ‘U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateral Engagement on Economic Security’.

¹⁰³ Cha, V. (2022), ‘Seeking a Win-Win Solution on the Inflation Reduction Act with Korea’, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 6 December 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/seeking-win-win-solution-inflation-reduction-act-korea>; Jae-hyuk, P. (2025), ‘Shipbuilding Rivalry Set to Intensify in Northeast Asia’, *Korea Times*, 9 July 2025, <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/business/companies/20250709/shipbuilding-rivalry-set-to-intensify-in-northeast-asia>.

¹⁰⁴ *The Economist* (2025), ‘America Cannot Dodge the Consequences of Rising Tariffs Forever’, 9 July 2025, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2025/07/09/america-cannot-dodge-the-consequences-of-rising-tariffs-for-ever>.

¹⁰⁵ Matsakis, L. (2025), ‘Why Trump Flip-Flopped on Nvidia Selling H20 Chips to China’, *Wired*, 14 August 2025, <https://www.wired.com/story/nvidia-chips-export-controls-trump-h20-security>.

Recommendation: Focus on key deliverables in economic security and technology.

In particular, policymakers should:

1. **Institutionalize the Trilateral Economic Security Dialogue and the Trilateral Export Control Dialogue through biannual meetings.** Bilateral economic tensions between the three countries, mostly due to President Trump’s tariff threats have become a major stumbling block in trilateral economic cooperation. These mechanisms, however, can become avenues to bridge some gaps to foster dialogues and ensure some policy coordination on these critical issues. Their importance became clearer than ever after China imposed restrictions on the export of rare earth metals in April 2025.
2. **Work to secure the critical minerals supply chains of all three countries.** The US, Japan and South Korea can make their critical minerals supply chains more resilient by sharing technology and jointly investing in refining projects. They can also leverage the Minerals Security Partnership to develop and employ coordinated steps.
3. **Find pathways to boost cooperation in the shipbuilding industry.** Areas of cooperation could include joint maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) of US shipping, co-production of commercial vessels and/or warships and increased foreign investment to boost the efficiency of US shipyards, with particular focus on dual-use shipping.¹⁰⁶ Both Japan and South Korea offer unique strengths in the shipbuilding industry: while Japan can more readily contribute to MRO of US-owned ships, South Korea has greater overall production capacity. A tangible example of cooperation in this area is a \$5 billion investment by the South Korean firm Hanwha in the Philadelphia shipyard with the aims of improving the efficiency of shipbuilding processes at the facility and increasing capacity.¹⁰⁷

Trilateral cooperation is not an inevitability. Rather, it is the product of decades of concerted diplomacy and strategic focus that have enabled the US, Japan and South Korea to look beyond past grievances and misalignments. The external security environment in the region – where China and North Korea are growing increasingly assertive – proves a clear rationale for a coordinated partnership between the US, Japan and South Korea. However, the durability of the mechanisms established since Camp David will ultimately depend on continued political will, as well as determination among policymakers to recast the partnership and demonstrate its relevance in changed circumstances. If those goals can be achieved, the trilateral partnership can help secure deterrence, peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific for years to come.

¹⁰⁶ Carroll, H. H. and Cook, C. R. (2025), *Identifying Pathways for U.S. Shipbuilding Cooperation with Northeast Asian Allies*, brief, Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/identifying-pathways-us-shipbuilding-cooperation-northeast-asian-allies#h2-possible-pathways-for-international-cooperation-with-u-s-allies>.

¹⁰⁷ Hanwha (2025), ‘Hanwha announces \$5 billion Philly Shipyard investment as part of South Korea’s commitment to US shipbuilding growth’, press release, 27 August 2025, <https://www.hanwha.com/newsroom/news/press-releases/hanwha-announces-5-billion-philly-shipyard-investment-as-part-of-south-koreas-commitment-to-us-shipbuilding-growth.do>.

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