

Online Series

2023. 08. 24. | CO 23-23

The ROK-U.S.-Japan Trilateral Summit at Camp David and The Future of Trilateral Cooperation

Lee, Kitae (Director, Global Strategy Research Division)

Min, TaeEun (Research Fellow, Global Strategy Research Division)

The leaders of the Republic of Korea (ROK), the United States (U.S.) and Japan, who convened on August 18 (local time) at the invitation of the U.S. President Joe Biden, formalized the trilateral partnership as a comprehensive network for stability in Northeast Asia as well as the Indo-Pacific region. The trilateral partnership, which encompasses security, diplomacy, and the economy, is expected to have significant implications not only on policies of countries in the Indo-Pacific region, but also those in other regions. Against this backdrop, this paper will assess the trilateral leaders' summit and bilateral talks and provide suggestions on South Korea's follow-up measures.

Assessment of the Trilateral Leaders' Summit

At the core of the summit's outcomes—the Spirit of Camp David, the Camp David Principles, and the Commitment to Consult among the ROK, the U.S. and Japan—is the notion that the trilateral partnership is a truly pan-regional consultation based on shared values. This summit, where the leaders agreed on a comprehensive joint response to global issues including the economy, technology, climate change, and nonproliferation based on shared values and norms, carries great significance in terms of the following four aspects.

First, the U.S. and Japan declared “their support for a unified, free, and peaceful Korean Peninsula” as a principle of the trilateral cooperation and pledged to advocate the free reunification of the Korean Peninsula led by South Korea. This commitment is significant in that it has presented the way for the future of the Korean Peninsula, which will have an impact not only on South Korea, but also on the U.S. and Japanese policies toward the Korean Peninsula, and serves as a driving force to facilitate the international cooperation in the reunification process led by South Korea. Furthermore, it is particularly meaningful that Japan’s participation in the South Korea-led reunification initiative was declared.

Second, South Korea, the U.S. and Japan made it clear that the trilateral partnership does not intend to change the existing international order and the status quo by reaffirming their solidarity with each other, sharing the universal values and norms. This move attests to their commitment to continued cooperation within the U.S.-led international order and their willingness not to tolerate any attempt to change the world order that has brought decades of stability and peace.

Third, trilateral cooperation between South Korea, the U.S. and Japan has become an institution as the leaders agreed to have regular military, diplomatic, and security consultations at various levels. In other words, a framework for cooperation has been established among the three countries, which will stay put regardless of transfer of power in any country within the trilateral cooperation. It is particularly noteworthy that the stability of South Korea-Japan relations, which have recently improved thanks to South Korea’s leading efforts, has been secured institutionally. All of this will contribute to expediting the trilateral joint response to global issues. The three countries are, therefore, expected to deter and address North Korea’s nuclear threats in a timely manner. Furthermore, since China may keep an eye on the joint response capabilities of the ROK, the U.S. and Japan when carrying out its policy toward the Korean Peninsula, it will be more cautious about making a bold decision: a move, such as economic retaliation against the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in 2016, might not be made as easily as it once was.

Fourth, the summit made it clear that the North Korean nuclear program is a major issue for the trilateral partnership. It is widely believed that the North Korean issue is low on the agenda in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy. However, the three countries reaffirmed their

commitment to the complete denuclearization as the North Korea issue was discussed as an agenda item during the three previous trilateral summits as well as the August summit. It is also noteworthy that the three countries have made their position clear on the ROK's possible acquisition of nuclear weapons by concurring with joint efforts to promote nonproliferation while the U.S. reaffirmed its commitment to providing nuclear deterrence for South Korea.

Assessment of Bilateral talks

Following the trilateral leaders' summit, the ROK-U.S., the ROK-Japan, and the U.S.-Japan bilateral talks took place. When it comes to the agreements reached at the respective bilateral talks, the focus is to be on the three points that are likely to have significant implications on the trilateral partnership going forward.

First, the leaders of South Korea and the U.S. agreed to further deepen cooperation against North Korea's exports of labor and illegal cyber activities to block funds that flow to develop its nuclear and missile programs. Until now, Seoul and Washington have not had any specific consultations on cutting off channels of funding as a means to impose sanctions against the North. Since South Korea and the U.S. reaffirmed their coordination on sanctions against the DPRK during the trilateral summit, an important momentum has been created for the three countries to give birth to a coordination mechanism to carry out sanctions against North Korea in the future.

Second, the leaders of South Korea and Japan shared the view that the two neighboring countries should promote bilateral security cooperation in addition to the trilateral partnership between the ROK, the U.S., and Japan. Despite the ongoing South Korea-Japan collaboration in various areas on the back of the improved bilateral ties this year, there have still been many challenges in pursuing security cooperation between the two countries. However, The South Korea-Japan security cooperation against North Korea's growing nuclear and missile threats is increasingly indispensable. Recognizing how significant such coordination is, both sides agreed to resume the suspended "vice-ministerial level strategic dialogue." Moving forward, the two sides should seek ways to strengthen security cooperation not only to tackle North Korea's nuclear weapon and missile threats but to effectively leverage their Indo-Pacific Strategies.

Third, the U.S. and Japan agreed to take the existing security and military cooperation to the next level. The two leaders decided to jointly develop a new missile interceptor system, or the Glide Phase Interceptor (GPI), to knock down hypersonic weapons currently being developed by China, Russia and North Korea. Furthermore, the U.S. and Japan are currently working on building satellite constellation that operates in conjunction with a number of small satellites with a view to improving missile detection capabilities. The move by the U.S. and Japan to elevate their alliance to a level that shares military technology needs to be expanded and applied to the trilateral partnership between South Korea, the U.S. and Japan.

Follow-up Measures

This paper will provide five policy suggestions on how to enhance diplomacy in line with the ROK-U.S.-Japan partnership. First, as stated in the Camp David Principles, diplomacy with member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Pacific Island countries must be pursued in earnest for the sake of the prosperity of the region. Doing so is important not only in terms of expanding South Korea's diplomatic sphere outside of the U.S.-China relations, but also in term of advancing South Korea's role in the trilateral collaboration. Countries in the region are cautious about joining the U.S.-led network due to concerns that ASEAN centrality can be undermined amid the strategic competition between the U.S. and China.

Another point is that ASEAN countries have a keen interest in Korea's successful economic growth as well as the Korean wave since their primary focus is to achieve economic development. In this sense, South Korea can take a bold initiative to expand its diplomatic presence, which will ultimately strengthen the roles of the ROK, the US, and Japan in the region. Furthermore, the region is also important as a litmus test for South Korea and Japan, as a member of the ASEAN+3, as they seek to create a new form of cooperation focusing on economic development and infrastructure construction outside of Northeast Asia.

Second, in response to North Korea's human rights issues in addition to its denuclearization, the trilateral coordination should be materialized at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). As China and Russia are shielding the DPRK in the Security Council, it is increasingly difficult

for the international community to proceed with resolutions and sanctions against the North's armed provocations. In addition, there is slim chance to see progress in denuclearization in the foreseeable future due to North Korea's repeated refusal to return to the negotiating table. In this regard, a strategic approach is required to proactively discuss human rights issues within the framework of the UNSC. Alongside the U.S. and Japan, South Korea should assume a bigger role as a new nonpermanent member of the UNSC.

Third, policy efforts to tackle North Korea's threats should be included in the Indo-Pacific Strategies of South Korea and Japan. More specifically, how to respond to Pyongyang's illegal maritime transshipment and illegal cyber activities, which are subject to sanctions of the UNSC, should be specified in their Indo-Pacific Strategies. To this end, it is important to call on the international community to participate in the respective Indo-Pacific Strategies of South Korea and of Japan. Furthermore, South Korea needs to seek ways to form a South Korea-Japan strategic dialogue on diplomacy and defense at ministerial level where they can discuss the Indo-Pacific Strategies.

Fourth, South Korea needs to find ways to participate in areas of global cooperation where the U.S. and Japan are getting ahead of South Korea in the process of advancing their alliance. In addition to the aforementioned U.S.-Japan alliance in military technology, South Korea has to actively engage in consultations with the two countries while bolstering its own capabilities so that it can join the areas of cooperation such as space security, which are being further sophisticated and institutionalized by the U.S. and Japan.

Fifth, it is crucial to initiate a specific process for practical cooperation between South Korea, the U.S. and Japan. Devising concrete measures is, therefore, required to give impetus to trilateral cooperation: in response to North Korean's nuclear threats, the three countries should share information about surveillance and reconnaissance with newly assigned roles; perform trilateral missile detection and interception training; and strengthen trilateral cooperation in the defense sector. When it comes to economic security, the three countries need to strengthen practical cooperation on joint development and protection of cutting-edge technologies and bilateral or trilateral development of resources with an aim of minimizing China's influence on global supply chains. ©KINU 2023

※ The views expressed in this paper are entirely those of the author and are not to be construed as representing those of the Korea Institute for National Reunification (KINU).