

A Roadmap for ROK-US-Japan Trilateral Security Cooperation (TSC)

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In the face of increasing security threats in the Indo-Pacific, and especially those by the DPRK, trilateral security cooperation (TSC) among the Republic of Korea, the United States, and Japan is imperative to sustain peace and stability in the region. The Camp David Summit, in this regard, has established a formal cooperative mechanism and produced meaningful trilateral agendas. Over the last several decades, the three nations have made several attempts to form cooperation but failed at every attempt. This research analyzes the brief history of trilateral cooperation between the Republic of Korea, the United States, and Japan and proposes a way to make this cooperation more sustainable. The key to increasing the mechanism's sustainability would be the institutionalization of agendas. In light of this, the research employs a norm life-cycle, presented by Finnemore and Sikkink, to assess the agendas discussed at Camp David at the August 2023 summit. Ultimately, the manuscript draws a roadmap for the TSC that the three countries' governments can refer to.

Keywords: ROK-US-Japan Trilateral Security Cooperation, TSC, Camp David Summit, ROK-US Alliance, ROK-Japan Relations, Norm Life-cycle

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I . Introduction

Trilateral security cooperation (hereafter ‘TSC’) between the Republic of Korea (hereafter ‘ROK’), the United States (hereafter ‘US’), and Japan was officially formed at the Camp David Summit in August 2023. After several failed attempts to create cooperation, it was a historic moment for the three nations. TSC has been established in the face of increasing military provocation by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (hereafter ‘DRPK’), the intensification of strategic rivalry between the US and China, the brutal Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the breakout of the Israel-Hamas war. Each of the above events directly or indirectly reshaped the Indo-Pacific region’s security landscape.

In this context, it is critical to assess TSC between the three nations and discuss the way forward. This article addresses several key questions. First, how should we interpret the significance of the Camp David Summit? Second, what are the goals of each nation in establishing TSC? Third, how can the three nations resolve any potential differences? To answer this question, this article includes the following sections. First, it reviews the history of TSC. While there has been a series of dialogues among the three after multiple DPRK provocations, initial attempts to establish TSC occurred during the 1960s. This article unearths and presents the efforts made by the US to initiate cooperation during the Cold War, then explains the developments that occurred in the post-Cold War era. The article will then expound on the trilateral efforts made after the inauguration of ROK President Yoon Suk Yeol. Reviewing the process and effort that enabled the three nations to meet at Camp David is essential for understanding TSC.

Finally, the paper proposes the road that TSC should take. Here, the author first explains how the current iteration of TSC differs from those of the past. Then, the author will discuss the critical agendas of the Camp David Summit. Past experiences tell us that sustainability is essential for TSC. To make TSC sustainable, selecting an agenda that will suit the national interests of all three countries is critical.

This article consists of the following order. First, the following section will be a literature review and theoretical analysis. Here, the author will introduce different scholarship concerning ROK-US-Japan trilateral cooperation. Some researchers regard ROK-Japan relations as the most important criterion for successful cooperation, while others assert that cooperation is the key to driving the US Indo-Pacific regional strategy. Then, the author will introduce the life-cycle of norms and the constructivist perspective as the basis for this paper's theoretical analysis, and explain TSC's sustainability within this context.

The third section will deal with the history of ROK-US-Japan trilateral cooperation, and the fourth section will present a roadmap for future TSC. According to the Biden administration's National Security Strategy, "the post-Cold War era is definitively over and a competition is underway between the major powers to shape what comes next"; furthermore, the "world is at an inflection point" confronting a new age of transnational threats and the beginning of renewed great power rivalry.¹ In the Indo-Pacific, which is the most populous, militarily equipped, and economically competitive region in the world, the US-ROK-Japan TSC has become undeniably important. In this respect, a roadmap for TSC needs to be drawn.

II. Literature Review and Theoretical Analysis

In international relations and foreign policy analysis, most of the previous research concerning trilateral cooperation has focused on cooperation between the US, Australia, and Japan, known as the Trilateral Security Dialogue (hereafter "TSD"). Previous scholarship concerning trilateral security cooperation among the ROK, US, and Japan has left much to be discussed. Not much research has been conducted on ROK-US-Japan trilateral security cooperation because the past efforts have not been

1 The White House, *National Security Strategy*, October 2022: 1-6.

successful. There are many reasons why past attempts at trilateral cooperation have failed. Unstable ROK-Japan relations may be one. The academic literature covering ROK-US-Japan trilateral cooperation can generally be divided into three sets.

The first set of previous scholarships concerns ROK-Japan relations in the context of trilateral security cooperation. Smith argues that “the most often cited challenge to effective trilateral policy coordination has been the difficult relationship between Seoul and Tokyo.”² For instance, anti-Japanese sentiment remains widespread in South Korean society. ROK-Japan relations are often beholden to domestic politics in one or both of the two countries. The bilateral relationship is primarily affected whenever there is a strong sentiment or opposition on one side. This dynamic exerts certain limits on the scope and scale of both bilateral and trilateral

Hinata-Yamaguchi introduces a capability-based cooperation framework for trilateral cooperation.³ This article analyzes the strategic and operational dimensions of trilateral cooperation that effectively deal with security risks. In the article, Hinata-Yamaguchi outlines the developments, constraints, and restraints of ROK-Japan security relations. The research argues that “the ROK-Japan partnership is essential in completing the alliance triangle with the United States to serve as the lynchpin of security in the Asia-Pacific.” The US-led alliance system in Asia is often described as a ‘hub-and-spoke’ system. In this system, the US serves as the hub and the ROK and Japan serve as spokes. The hub-and-spoke system differs from the US alliance system in Europe, namely ‘collective security.’ Therefore, a stable bilateral relationship between the ROK and Japan would be the prerequisite for trilateral

2 Sheila A. Smith, *The U.S.-Japan-ROK Trilateral: Better at Deterrence than Diplomacy?* (Washington, D.C.: Korea Economic Institute of America, 2020) keia.org.

3 Ryo Hinata-Yamaguchi, “Completing the US-Japan-Korea Alliance Triangle: Prospects and Issues in Japan-Korea Security Cooperation,” *Korean Journal of Defense Analyses* 28 (2016).

cooperation in the region.

The work of Ralph Cossa discusses a virtual alliance, referring to ROK-US-Japan trilateral cooperation.⁴ According to Cossa, the critical “common denominator of the US-ROK and US-Japan bilateral alliance” is the US, and the “Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) institutionalized three-way cooperation, at least dealing with North Korea.” The TCOG was initiated after DPRK had launched a long-range missile, *Taepodong*, in 1998. After the launch, the ROK, the US, and Japan started intelligence sharing on the DPRK to better prepare for future contingencies. Cossa argued that the virtual alliance among the three countries may not be permanent, but could serve as a long-term factor in stabilizing regional security. In this regard, it is essential to trace why and how the relations eventually affected the trilateral relations. However, this literature set does not explain the structure or contents of trilateral cooperation.

The second set of literature deals with US-led mini-multilateralism (mini-lateralism), the conceptual framework of trilateral cooperation. Wuthnow argues that the US promotes “policy coordination and interoperability among its allies and partners, through dialogues, exercises, intelligence-sharing agreements, and other means.”⁵ However, “‘minilateral’ activities could exacerbate Chinese fears of ‘encirclement’ and lead to strategic or economic counter-moves.” According to Wuthnow, trilateral cooperation between the ROK, the US, and Japan would be a threat to China. However, this would not necessarily mean a security dilemma in Asia since states would still be economically dependent on China even as they pursue strengthened security relations with the US. This should also open possibilities for greater multilateral cooperation under most conditions.

4 Ralph A. Cossa, “US-ROK-Japan: Why a ‘Virtual Alliance’ Makes Sense.” *Korean Journal of Defense Analyses*, vol. 12 (2000).

5 Joel Wuthnow, “U.S. ‘Minilateralism’ in Asia and China’s Responses: A New Security Dilemma?” *Journal of Contemporary China* 28 (2018).

ROK-US-Japan trilateral cooperation is technically a mini-multilateral network. Since it is a US-led multilateral network, it would undoubtedly serve US interests. In this respect, the trilateral cooperation would seem to work against China. However, the topic of China's potential response to increased ROK-US-Japan trilateral cooperation remains outside the scope of this article. Trilateral cooperation diversifies its objectives, and at Camp David, the main topic of discussion was deterring the DPRK. In this article, the author regards the DPRK as the main reason for the formation of TSC.

Lee argues that the "Biden administration's mini-multilateral strategy in the Indo-Pacific region gave a push for the ROK-US-Japan trilateral security cooperation."⁶ In other words, Biden's Indo-Pacific strategy is a foundation for such a trilateral security cooperation. Lee argues that the Biden administration is expanding the mini-multilateral network in the Indo-Pacific region. Highlighting the Biden administration's changes in Indo-Pacific strategy and linking them to the structure of trilateral cooperation may be the best way of explaining the most recent trend. Although the cooperation can only be successful when all three governments agree to it, it is also important to note that the direction of the cooperation could differ. In this regard, the author aims to discuss the agendas of the TSC.

The third set of literature concerns the role of trilateral cooperation. Nam and Song argue that amid "US-China strategic competition intensification, Seoul can expand its diplomatic capacity through trilateral cooperation [punching above its weight]."⁷ In the past, the ROK-US-Japan cooperation claimed China as a stakeholder contributing to regional peace. Nam and Song also mention the objective of trilateral cooperation

6 Alex Soohoon Lee. "Achievements and Tasks of 2023 ROK-US Summit: Alliance in action toward the future." *Northeast Asia Security Analysis*, Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, May 9, 2023. [In Korean]

7 Chang Hee Nam and Sang-ho Song, "Bolstering the Alliance for a Trilateralism-Based Security Strategy for South Korea in Times of US-China Rivalry," *Pacific Focus* 37, no. 1 (2022): 68-94.

between the ROK, the US, and Japan, namely to deter DPRK provocations and expand international cooperation to denuclearize DPRK.

Yeo claims that the main objective of trilateral cooperation is to eliminate DPRK's nuclear and missile threats. However, trilateral security cooperation "is not only important for addressing North Korea threats but in providing a major platform for cultivating deeper roots to cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region... The Taiwan issue will pose a particularly thorny problem"⁸ The Taiwan Strait issue will remain one of the concerns of the Trilateral security cooperation. Of the three sets of scholarship mentioned here, this last set is the most recently published and contains the most up-to-date information on TSC. The research in this article was established based on this set of literature.

Each of the three sets of literature mentioned here has a unique way of analyzing trilateral cooperation. Over the past several decades, research has followed on different occasions and events, and previous and current scholarship each has distinctive value. The author conducted the research for this article after the Camp David Summit, on August 18th, 2023, where multiple agendas were introduced. In this article, the author aims to analyze what these agendas are and suggest ways to promote them for better US-ROK-Japan cooperation.

Several conceptual and theoretical approaches could be employed to assess trilateral security cooperation. Victor Cha introduces the "quasi-alliance" model, where "two states that remain unallied but have a third party as a common ally."⁹ While there are historical and territorial disputes between the ROK and Japan, under certain conditions (namely the weakening of US security commitment in the region) ROK-Japan bilateral relations can change when the two adopt a more pragmatic

8 Andrew Yeo, "Strengthening ROK-U.S.-Japan Cooperation in Response to North Korean Nuclear Threats and Indo-Pacific Security Challenges," *Korean National Strategy* 8, no. 1 (2023): 85-109.

9 Victor Cha, *Alignment Despite Antagonism: The United States-Korea-Japan Security Triangle* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

approach. This reasoning, which stems from a fear of abandonment, illustrates the US Indo-Pacific strategy can influence bilateral relations. In other words, it is essential for the US to play a meaningful role in constructing trilateral security cooperation.

The international relations theories of realism and liberalism would adequately explain the stance and policy direction of the ROK, the US, and Japan. However, constructivism most explicitly illustrates the importance of each nation's agenda and shows a possible way to increase the sustainability of their cooperation. The importance of ideas and norms is well-versed by constructivists. Liberals and realists failed to predict the end of the Cold War, while constructivists saw it. Various explanations exist about the end of the Cold War or the collapse of the Soviet Union. The decline of the Soviet Union's global position and influence, the increase of the US global sphere of influence, and even the expansion of the democratic bloc are rationales based on the concept of power dynamics, which realists may cite in their arguments. However, constructivists argue that "the end of the Cold War was attributed to ideas – in this case, Gorbachev's 'new thinking'."¹⁰ In other words, it was the idea of an individual - Mikhail Gorbachev - that ended the Cold War. This explanation for the end of the Cold War strengthened the credibility of constructivist explanations.

Having stated this, the roadmap of TSC outlined in this article is based on the concept of the norm life cycle, which is a constructivist approach. Here, a norm is "a standard of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity."¹¹ For example, sovereignty is a norm. The peace of Westphalia in 1648 gave birth to the concept of sovereignty, which later became a norm recognized by the world. In this article, the author applies some of the agendas discussed at the August 2023 Camp David Summit to the concept

10 Andreea Mosila, "Mikhail Gorbachev: A Transformational Leader," *Global Security and Intelligence Studies*, vol. 52, no. 1 (2022): 11. 7-24.

11 Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization*, vol. 52, no. 4 (1998): 887-917.

of the norm life cycle. Finnemore and Sikkink introduced the concept of the “norm life cycle.” The life cycle consists of norm emergence, norm cascade, and norm internalization.

In the first stage, norm entrepreneurs convince a critical mass of states, “norm leaders,” to adopt a norm. In the second stage, called “norm cascade,” norm leaders try to socialize other states, sometimes through peer pressure, into embracing the norm. In the final stage of “norm internalization,” the norm acquires a taken-for-granted quality and ceases to be a matter of broad public debate. Even though TSC agendas at the Camp David Summit are limited to discussions between just three nations, not all 200 countries in the world, the author of this article employs Finnemore and Sikkink’s concepts to assessments of TSC agendas, asserting that when a TSC agenda satisfies all stages, it is considered a “norm” among the three nations and it will increase the overall sustainability of the TSC.

In this regard, this article lays out the roadmap of TSC after the Camp David Summit. Trilateral security cooperation proved unsustainable for various reasons. Drawing a roadmap for future cooperation would increase its sustainability. A step-by-step institutionalization of individual agendas is crucial to achieve this goal. Before discussing the roadmap, the following section reviews the history of ROK-US-Japan trilateral security cooperation to find its shortcomings.

III. TSC: Past and Present¹²

1. Historical Analysis

Trilateral cooperation between the ROK, US, and Japan officially

12 Some of the contents in this section are based on the analysis conducted in the author’s contributed chapter, Alex Soohoon Lee, “The Republic of Korea, Japan, United States Trilateral Cooperation: A Korean Perspective” in *The Next 70 Years, Future Paths for the ROK-U.S. Alliance and Defense Cooperation*, Korea Institute for Defense Analyses (KIDA), September 2023.

began in 1999, when the three formally initiated the TCOG. However, the US made numerous attempts to facilitate this cooperation in the past. One such effort took place in 1965, when US President Lyndon Johnson congratulated ROK President Park Chung-hee for signing a basic treaty with Japan.¹³ The treaty, which established diplomatic relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea, was signed a year after the People's Republic of China (hereafter the 'PRC') conducted its first atomic bomb test. On October 16, 1964, the PRC tested its first Uranium-235, a payload of 25 kilotons.¹⁴ The Chinese government officially stated the reason for the test was due to the "ever-increasing nuclear threat posed by the United States," therefore, it was "forced to conduct nuclear tests and develop nuclear weapons."¹⁵

President Johnson announced that they were aware of the test and condemned the Chinese government that such a test would jeopardize both international security and Chinese people's lives. He also added that the US will prepare to protect its allies from Chinese provocations.¹⁶ This may have been why President Johnson met President Park to congratulate him on the 1965 signing of the basic relations treaty between the ROK and Japan. President Johnson wanted the critical spokes, the ROK and Japan, to expand bilateral cooperation and eventually work toward setting up trilateral security cooperation in the region in the face of China's provocation. Although bilateral cooperation between the ROK and Japan has gone through ebbs and flows in the decades following 1965, President Johnson's actions present the US' well-intended position regarding trilateral cooperation.

13 US Office of the Historian, "48. Memorandum of Conversation," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea*, May 17, 1965.

14 Atomic Archive. "Chinese Becomes a Nuclear Nation," atomicarchive.com.

15 Hsinhua, "Statement by Peking on Nuclear Test," *The New York Times*, October 17, 1964.

16 The American Presidency Project, "Statement by the President on the First Chinese Nuclear Device," October 16, 1964, presidency.ucsb.edu.

As mentioned above, the first official attempt at cooperation took place in 1999. This was right after DPRK had tested a long-range missile, *Taepodong*. On the 31st of August 1998, DPRK launched *Taepodong-1*, which flew over Japanese territory and landed in the west Pacific. Whether the test was successful or not was irrelevant. *Taepodong-1*'s trajectory over 1,500km greatly surprised the international community.¹⁷ The ROK, US, and Japan formed the TCOG in response to this event. On May 24, 1999, the three countries held their first meeting in Tokyo to discuss possible cooperation in dealing with DPRK issues. In this deputy-ministerial meeting, they agreed to stay together and remain one voice regardless of who negotiates with DPRK. They not only discussed deterring DPRK missile provocation but also talked about providing humanitarian aid to North Korean people.

The Bush administration's first TCOG meeting was held before the September 11, 2001 terror attacks. There, the three agreed to work together toward opening US-DPRK talks and managing the peace and prosperity of the Korean Peninsula. The Bush administration, which did not yet have its own DPRK strategy, had discussed a great deal with the ROK. TCOG was a meaningful trilateral attempt to resolve DPRK issues. However, the DPRK's continued provocations and nuclear development program halted trilateral cooperation. The Six-Party Talks became a new venue for DPRK denuclearization and TCOG gradually faded out.

The DPRK conducted its third nuclear test in 2013, nearly a decade and a half after the first TCOG meeting. In response, the three nations signed the Trilateral Information Sharing Agreement (hereafter "TISA"). Despite the efforts made by the surrounding nations at the Six-Party Talks, the DPRK continued its nuclear development, conducting its first three tests in 2006, 2009, and 2013, respectively. The payload of the third nuclear test was between 6 to 9 kilotons, making it much more potent than the first nuclear test (0.5 to 2 kilotons) and the second one (2 to 4 kilotons).¹⁸ In the

17 Sang-ho, Yoon. "From Taepodong to Mach 10... 60 provocations during 10 years of Kim Jong-un regime." *Dong-A Ilbo*, January 15, 2022.

face of DPRK's nuclear provocations, the ROK, US and Japan signed TISA in 2014. TISA was legally based on two legal frameworks: the 1997 ROK-US General Security of Military Information Agreement (hereafter 'GSOMIA') and the 2007 US-Japan GSOMIA. Vice ministers of the three nations signed the agreement on December 29, 2014.

Through TISA¹⁹ the three nations exchanged military intelligence on DPRK provocations and missile developments. The ROK military sent to the United States Forces in Korea (hereafter 'USFK') and the Indo-Pacific command, and the Japanese Self-Defense Forces did the same. Information flowed in the direction of Self-Defense Forces to the United States Forces in Japan (hereafter 'USFJ') and the Indo-Pacific Command. Once this information is gathered in the Indo-Pacific Command, the US releases it upon request. If the ROK military calls for intelligence from the Japanese side, the Indo-Pacific Command consults with the Self-Defense Forces first and then releases information to the ROK military, and vice versa.

The main problem of the TISA was that there was no direct link between the ROK military and the Japanese Self-Defense Forces. Each of the three nations used monitoring assets such as satellites, the AEGIS Weapon System, and early warning radar when the DPRK launched a missile test. Due to the curvature of the earth, information from all three nations is needed to accurately calculate a missile's trajectory. If this were to happen in real-time, the three could promptly coordinate a response. However, the lack of a direct link caused delays in information sharing, especially between the ROK and Japan.

Several factors contributed to the fact that TCOG and TISA no longer

18 It was measured both by the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) and the ROK Ministry of National Defense. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) presented the combined data. CSIS, "Missiles of North Korea," Nov. 22, 2022, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/>.

19 US Department of Defense, "Signing of Trilateral Information Sharing Arrangement Concerning the Nuclear and Missile Threats Posed by North Korea," December 18, 2014.

exist. Domestic politics or international security environment could be one reason. However, the fundamental explanation is that both TCOG and TISA failed to institutionalize the cooperation. This is why analyzing the cooperation as part of the “norm life-cycle” is critical.

2. Recent Efforts

The Biden administration’s change in its Indo-Pacific Strategy has opened a new venue for trilateral security cooperation, and the pace of ROK-US-Japan trilateral security cooperation has picked up after the inauguration of ROK President Yoon. Recent efforts by the three nations, written in their Indo-Pacific strategies, enabled the initiation of the trilateral security cooperation. In this regard, reviewing each nation’s Indo-Pacific Strategy is essential. The Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States emphasizes the importance of trilateral security cooperation among the US, the ROK, and Japan.²⁰

The Biden administration has called for an end to the post-Cold War era,²¹ claiming that the US needs a new regional strategy to pursue its strategic objectives in the decisive decade ahead. In this light, the Biden administration’s efforts to promote trilateral security cooperation have been consistent. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that the ROK and Japan are “key allies” of the US that play a critical role in maintaining the liberal international order.²² Secretary Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin visited Seoul and Tokyo in March 2021 to hold 2+2 meetings with their Korean and Japanese counterparts. After the US-Japan 2+2 meeting in Tokyo, Secretary Blinken emphasized the importance of strengthening trilateral cooperation to resolve the DPRK nuclear problem in the statement but he added, “in my judgment”²³ understanding the

20 The White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, 2022.

21 The White House, *National Security Strategy*, 2022.

22 Antony. J. Blinken and Lloyd. J. Austin III, “America’s Partnerships are ‘Force Multipliers’ in the World,” *The Washington Post*, 2021.

23 U.S. Department of State, “Joint Statement of the 2021 Republic of Korea-United

tension between the ROK and Japan. In March 2021, ROK-Japan relations were tense. Therefore, Secretary Blinken's tone in the statement regarding ROK-Japan bilateral relations was also cautious.

The Biden administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy, published nine months before the National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy, states that "we will seek to coordinate our regional strategies in a trilateral context."²⁴ Such a definitive tone illustrates that trilateral cooperation with ROK and Japan will be the core of the US Indo-Pacific strategy. In this regard, the US will work towards strengthening the relations between the ROK and Japan.²⁵ The Indo-Pacific Action Plan states that the United States will pursue ten core lines of effort. Among them, the seventh line is to "Expand US-Japan-ROK Cooperation."²⁶ According to this line, the US will "continue to cooperate closely through trilateral channels on the DPRK."

The Biden administration has set clear imperatives for trilateral security cooperation. The Biden administration has clear incentives to push this cooperation forward, deterring China and the DPRK. As stated, trilateral security cooperation is important for the US to manage the competition with China in the Indo-Pacific region and deter DPRK provocations. In other words, trilateral security cooperation with the ROK and Japan is vital for the preservation of peace and prosperity and maintenance of the region's rules-based order.

In December 2022, Japan underwent a significant change in its security strategy. Japan's 2022 Defense Strategy states that "a key to deterring invasion against Japan is counterstrike capabilities that leverage

States Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting ('2+2')," Department of State, 2021, [state.gov](https://www.state.gov).

24 U.S. Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region*, U.S. Department of Defense, 2019, <https://media.defense.gov>.

25 Ibid.

26 The White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, 2022.

stand-off defense capability and other capabilities.”²⁷ It was by far the most significant change in Japanese defense strategy. According to Tsuneo, such a revision can be “considered a turning point in Japan’s defense policy since the aftermath of World War II, when the principle of pacifism took precedence.”²⁸ However, it is not only the turning point for Japan’s security strategy but also a significant shift in the US regional strategy. With such a change, some would say that the US-Japan alliance has truly become a traditional military alliance that the US will utilize to maintain region’s peace and prosperity. The US Indo-Pacific Strategy may be revised with the newly adopted Japanese defense strategy.

Unlike the ROK and the US, Japan did not publish an official or formal version of the Indo-Pacific strategy. Instead, Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs released different versions of its Indo-Pacific strategy, or plan. First, Prime Minister Kishida’s speech in New Delhi during his visit in March 2023 illustrates the general direction of Japan’s Indo-Pacific strategy. In this speech, Minister Kishida explains the reason for developing FOIP (Free and Open Indo-Pacific) and proposes that Japan will “expand cooperation for FOIP.” He claims that Japan “will enhance the connectivity of the Indo-Pacific region, foster the region into a place that values freedom, the rule of law, free from force or coercion, and make it prosperous.”²⁹ This shows Japan’s strong commitment to the region.

Another difference between Japan’s Indo-Pacific strategy and the ones of the ROK and the US is that it does not necessarily emphasize the importance of trilateral security cooperation. While both the ROK and US Indo-Pacific strategies state the necessity of trilateral cooperation, Japan’s does not. Out of three documents published by Japan MOFA, only the PDF

27 Japan Ministry of Defense, *National Defense Strategy*, Translated by Ministry of Defense, December 16, 2022.

28 Tsuneo Watanabe, “What’s New in Japan’s Three Strategic Document,” CSIS, February 13, 2023.

29 Fumio Kishida, “The Future of the Indo-Pacific: Japan’s New Plan for a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific – Together with India, as an Indispensable Partner,’” Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 20, 2023.

version published in March mentions it. Its reference slide, strengthening domestic and international partnership, states that Japan would utilize “frameworks such as the G7, Japan-U.S.-Australia-India, and Japan-U.S.-Korea, promote cooperation for rulemaking and enhancement of autonomy of each country.”³⁰ In other words, the goal of trilateral cooperation between the US and the ROK is to enhance the autonomy of each country. This tone is relatively softer than the one appears in the ROK and the US Indo-Pacific strategies.

The ROK government published its Indo-Pacific Strategy in December 2022.³¹ As its official title “Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region” claims, the ROK Indo-Pacific Strategy upholds the values of such in its regional strategy. The ROK Indo-Pacific Strategy is composed of vision (a free, peaceful, and prosperous Indo-Pacific), principles of cooperation (inclusiveness, trust, and reciprocity), regional scope (different regions in the world), and core lines of effort. Like US Indo-Pacific Strategy, ROK Indo-Pacific Strategy also demonstrates core lines of effort that the ROK will focus on.

In this strategy, the Yoon government points out that ROK is “aspiring to become a Global Pivotal State that actively seeks out agenda for cooperation and shapes discussions in the region and the wider world.”³² Global Pivotal State, Yoon’s vision of the ROK, has been mentioned numerous times in various official government documents, including the Indo-Pacific Strategy. As described in the strategy, ROK playing meaningful regional and global roles is the key to becoming a Global Pivotal State. The ROK is willing to increase its role in “addressing various issues in the region and building a positive regional order.”³³ The ROK has the

30 Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “New Plan for a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP),” March 2023.

31 The Government of the Republic of Korea, *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region* (English Version), 2022.

32 Ibid.

33 The Government of the Republic of Korea, *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region* (Korean Version), 2022.

intention and capability to play a proactive role in maintaining the regional order.

One of the differences between the US and the ROK Indo-Pacific strategies is how the two assess China. While both mentioned “inclusiveness” in their strategies, the US Indo-Pacific Strategy describes China as presenting a “mounting challenge” where its “coercion and aggression spans the globe, but it is most acute in the Indo-Pacific.”³⁴ ROK Indo-Pacific Strategy, on the contrary, describes China as “a key partner for achieving prosperity and peace in the Indo-Pacific region.” Thus, ROK will “nurture a sounder and more mature relationship as we pursue shared interests based on mutual respect and reciprocity, guided by international norms and rules.”³⁵ The ROK sought to enhance its relations with China regarding geopolitical proximity and economic partnership.

ROK’s first Indo-Pacific Strategy states the significance of the trilateral security cooperation with the US and Japan. It says, “We [three nations] share the values of liberal democracy and human rights.” Also, trilateral security cooperation addresses “not only North Korea’s nuclear and missile threats, but also supply chain disruptions, cyber-security, climate change, health crisis, and other emerging regional and global issues.”³⁶ The late trilateral cooperation, TCOG and TISA, focused on resolving DPRK nuclear and missile problems. However, the Yoon government set a higher standard for trilateral cooperation, dealing with regional and global issues. With such motivation, the ROK government proposes the vision of trilateral security cooperation.

To accomplishing the vision of Global Pivotal State, ROK-US-Japan trilateral security cooperation would be essential. Over the two years, leaders of the three nations met several times. After the NATO Summit meeting in July 2022, major meetings took place at the ASEAN Summit

34 The White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, 2022.

35 The Government of the Republic of Korea, *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region*, (English Version), 2022.

36 Ibid.

meeting in November 2022 and at Camp David in August 2023. During the ASEAN Summit meeting at Phnom Penh, the trilateral summit occurred among the ROK, the US, and Japan. In this meeting, the leaders condemned “DPRK’s unprecedented number of ballistic missile launches” and reaffirmed “their commitment to the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”³⁷ It was the first trilateral statement released by the Yoon, Biden, and Kishida governments.

The primary outcome of this meeting was setting up a system to share “DPRK missile warning data in real-time” to enhance the trilateral ability to detect and assess DPRK missile threats. In the meeting, the leaders condemned Russia’s brutal war of aggression against Ukraine. They emphasized maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, the first time the three leaders publicly mentioned it. During the G7 meeting, the three leaders did not publish the statement but they reemphasized the cooperation discussed over the Phnom Penh meeting. President Biden invited President Yoon and Prime Minister Kishida to the US for the next trilateral summit meeting.

The historic meeting at Camp David was the first meeting that had been prepared exclusively for the three nations. Over the last few years, the trilateral summit took place in different multilateral meetings; however, at Camp David, only the three leaders met. Three documents have been generated from the Camp David summit meeting. They are The Spirit of Camp David, Camp David Principles, and Commitment to Consult. The Spirit of Camp David is the joint statement of the three leaders, and it claims that three nations will ensure that the “Indo-Pacific is thriving, connected, resilient, stable, and secure. Ours is a partnership built not just for our people but for the entire Indo-Pacific.”³⁸ The leaders expressed how the trilateral security cooperation would work for the region.

37 The ROK President’s Office, *Phnom Penh Statement on Trilateral Partnership for the Indo-Pacific*, 2022.

38 The White House, “The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States,” [whitehouse.gov](https://www.whitehouse.gov), 2023.

Three leaders reemphasized the DPRK and Taiwan Strait in the statement. Three will be fully committed to the complete denuclearization of DPRK and, simultaneously, will “remain committed to dialogue with the DPRK with no preconditions.”³⁹ While complete denuclearization is non-negotiable, the three would remain intact in the diplomatic approach to the DPRK. Three also reaffirmed “the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as an indispensable element of security and prosperity in the international community.”⁴⁰ Although it has been repeated multiple times in bilateral and trilateral meetings, this time, the weight of the message that came out of Camp David has certainly been different. Furthermore, three announced the operationalization of real-time missile warning data sharing on the DPRK by the end of 2023 and “enhanced ballistic missile defense cooperation to counter DPRK nuclear and missile threats.”⁴¹

There are three notable accomplishments from the Camp David Summit.⁴² First, they regularized some of the agendas for cooperation. Annual summit and ministerial (foreign, defense, and national security council) meetings will occur from 2024. Also, the three agreed to “hold annual, named, multi-domain trilateral exercises regularly to enhance our coordinated capabilities and cooperation.”⁴³ This is a big step for regularizing trilateral cooperation, increasing the sustainability of the cooperation. Second, the three created the most robust security cooperation in the region. The combined GDP of the three is 32% of the global total.⁴⁴ Moreover, ROK and Japan are in the top 10 strongest

39 The White House, “Camp David Principles,” August 18, 2023, [whitehouse.gov](https://www.whitehouse.gov).

40 Ibid.

41 The White House, “The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States,” 2023.

42 Alex Soohoon Lee. “Camp David ROK-US-Japan Summit Meeting: Achievements and Tasks.” *Northeast Asia Security Analysis*, Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, August 25, 2023. [In Korean]

43 The White House, “The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States,” 2023.

44 Kyung-sik Lee. “Korea, U.S., Japan account for 32% of the entire GDP of

militaries in the world, while the US remains number one. Third, three declared Commitment to Consult to “share information, align our messaging, and coordinate response actions.”⁴⁵ It’s not a collective security exercised by NATO, but three agreed to consult if any of them is under threat.

From the 1960s to Camp David, trilateral cooperation has gone through ebbs and flows. Three have cooperated to counter common threats, especially DPRK. To deter DPRK missile and nuclear provocations, three direct stakeholders, the ROK, the US, and Japan, must work together. In this regard, the Camp David Summit was a great success in producing significant measures of collaboration. Having such productive outcomes from Camp David, the trilateral security cooperation is now at a critical juncture where it needs to produce actual results. For producing meaningful results, it is essential to draw a roadmap which the following section will deal with.

IV. A Roadmap for TSC

The security environment of the Indo-Pacific has also dramatically changed due to the threat posed by the DPRK. War broke out against most people’s expectations in Europe and the Middle East. The Indo-Pacific would hardly be an exception. The Korean Peninsula and Taiwan Strait could be the places with possible contingencies in this region. To preserve the peace and stability of the region, Indo-Pacific nations need to work together. In this regard, TSC between the Republic of Korea, the United States, and Japan is crucial.

This section focuses on proposing a roadmap for TSC. As previously mentioned, the trilateral cooperation has been through ebbs and flows due to various factors ranging from domestic issues to the international

the world,” *The Korea Post*, August 19, 2023, <https://www.koreapost.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=33079>.

45 The White House, “Commitment to Consult,” August 18, 2023, [whitehouse.gov](https://www.whitehouse.gov/).

security environment. Nonetheless, the grave threat posed by the DPRK is something that should be handled promptly in a time when its missile technology is advancing tremendously. With the recently launched *Malligyong-1* spy satellite, the DRPK claimed it obtained “detailed images of the White House, the Pentagon, and US nuclear aircraft carriers.”⁴⁶ This claim is unverified, but if it turns out to be true the US, the ROK, and Japan will be exposed to a whole new level of threat.

Against this backdrop, it is time for the ROK, the US, and Japan to have TSC set in stone. The security landscape of the Indo-Pacific region has changed tremendously, and the three nations have come to realize the importance of working together to secure their citizens and further preserve the peace and prosperity of the region. Therefore, TSC should be free from changes in domestic politics and the dynamics of the international security environment. In this regard, the key to successful TSC would be sustainability, which would require institutionalization of the cooperation. As previously explained, Finnemore and Sikkink’s concept of the “norm life cycle” could provide theoretical backing to TSC institutionalization and sustainability.

Again, according to Finnemore and Sikkink, a norm is “a standard of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity.” National sovereignty is a modern norm, whereas slavery is an outdated norm that was widely practiced and openly accepted in the past. Finnemore and Sikkink argue that most international norms begin as domestic norms. At the norm emergence stage, some norm entrepreneurs use international norms to strengthen their status in domestic politics.⁴⁷ Such a constructivist approach interprets the behavior of states in domestic and international affairs through the lens of the norm life-cycle.

The way the author utilizes the concept of the norm life-cycle in this

46 Justin McCurry, “North Korea claims spy satellite has photographed White House and Pentagon,” *Reuters*, November 28, 2023.

47 Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, “International Norm Dynamics and Political Change,” *International Organization*, vol. 52, no. 4 (1998): 887-917.

article differs from what Finnemore and Sikkink suggest. Here, the agenda for TSC is considered a norm for two reasons. First, a TSC agenda may not be a “standard of appropriate behavior for actors” as defined by Finnemore and Sikkink. Second, although the concept of the norm life-cycle does not require a certain number of actors, only three actors are needed for ROK-US-Japan TSC. Finnemore and Sikkink suggest a tipping point, which requires a “critical mass of state actors” between the stage of norm emergence and norm cascade. This means that if two out of three actors in TSC embrace specific agendas, it would be at the stage of norm cascade.

This could be interpreted in only two ways: either all three nations adopt the agenda, or only two do, with one standing against the agenda. In this case, there would be an internal conflict among the three nations. This certainly is a process that ROK-US-Japan TSC must undergo. Throughout the process, the three nations will build a learning curve and become better at dealing with new agendas. The outcomes shared in the 2023 Camp David meeting laid out agendas for the three leaders to work with. This section deals with three components that construct a TSC roadmap. First, the agendas from Camp David will be reviewed; second, possible new agendas will be presented; lastly, an idea of setting up the secretariat will be proposed. The suggestions made in this section are for increasing the sustainability of TSC; in this respect, final recommendation would be to set up a secretariat that would operate TSC.

1. Camp David Agenda

Technically, all agendas discussed at Camp David are either at the norm cascade or internalization stage. To make it this far, the agenda would be well past the stage of norm emergence since the three had already openly discussed it in the trilateral meeting. However, considering the TSC roadmap, defining where each agenda stands is essential. For this article, the author has selected five agendas from the Camp David Summit for analysis. The first agenda is the real-time sharing of the three nations’ DPRK missile warning data. In the past, the three had exchanged

information on DPRK missiles in a limited sense. The TISA was a combination of two bilateral GSOMIAs (ROK-US and US-Japan) but lacked a direct link between ROK and Japan. However, at Camp David, the three leaders confirmed opening of a three-way data-sharing mechanism, which will be realized by the end of the year. Therefore, real-time missile warning data sharing mechanism has entered the norm internalization stage.

The second agenda is the regularization of trilateral meetings at varying levels and trilateral multi-domain military exercises. Both are on the verge of internationalization. They have undoubtedly passed the cascade stage but are in the process of setting up plans for 2024. Once each meeting among three nations takes place in 2024, it could be considered to have entered the stage of norm internalization. The same goes for the trilateral multi-domain military exercises. The three countries' militaries will set up a schedule for annual exercises. For now, both trilateral meetings and military exercises are considered at the stage of norm cascade.

The third agenda is trilateral cooperation in space security. Over the summit, three leaders agreed to cooperate on the "space domain, national strategies, and the responsible use of space." In the joint statement in commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the alliance, President Yoon and President Biden called for strengthening space cooperation. President Biden welcomed the ROK's establishment of the Korea Aero Space Administration (KASA). Space cooperation can be done trilaterally. At this point, space cooperation among the three remain in the norm cascade stage.

The fourth agenda concerns cooperation between the three nations with ASEAN and the Pacific Islands. In the Camp David joint statement, the three leaders agreed to work with ASEAN based on ASEAN centrality and with the Pacific Islands based on the Pacific Way. TSC must work with ASEAN and the Pacific Islands in climate change, maritime security, and cyber security. Unlike space cooperation, the three nations go through

norm cascade and emergence stages. It is going through the emergence stage since the two counterparts, ASEAN and Pacific Islands, haven't promoted the cooperation. It will be at the norm cascade stage when cooperation is realized with both regions.

The final agenda of this research would concern the three nations' cooperation in the Taiwan Strait. Under the Taiwan Contingency, there is a possibility of trilateral cooperation. This agenda is also in the stage of norm emergence. In fact, it is impossible to assess this agenda at this point since there has been no contingencies since the Camp David Summit. Three leaders affirmed the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait but have not planned any specific cooperative measures yet.

Among the five agendas discussed above, one is at the norm internalization stage, two are in the cascade, and two are at the norm emergence stage. This analysis shows where each TSC agenda is located in the norm life-cycle. Once they are all internalized, the level of institutionalization of the TSC would increase and eventually would positively affect sustainability of the TSC. <Table 1>

<Table 1> TSC Agendas on Norm Life-Cycle

TSC Agenda	Norm Life Cycle		
	Emergence	Cascade	Internalization
Real-time sharing of DPRK missile warning data			
Regularization of high-level meetings and military exercises			
Cooperation in space security			
Cooperation with ASEAN and the Pacific Islands			
Cooperation in the Taiwan Strait			

Source: Created by the author

2. Possible Agendas

Besides the agenda discussed at the Camp David Summit, the following agendas could also be considered for future TSC. Of the notable

mini-multilateral cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (hereafter 'Quad') between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States mainly focuses on non-traditional security agendas such as climate change and emerging technologies. At the same time, AUKUS primarily deals with the traditional security agenda of building nuclear-powered submarines for Australia. In this regard, TSC, presents more diverse agendas in both scope and scale than what Quad or AUKUS hold. More diverse agendas could be poured into the basket of TSC in a long run.

Search and rescue exercises (hereafter "SAREX") have been a TSC agenda. SAREX focuses on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (hereafter "HA/DR") and has been held annually until 2016. After COVID-19, SAREX has been held from 2023 again. This is an agenda that TSC can certainly commit. The Quad originated from four nations: the US, Japan, Australia, and India, which worked together in disaster relief missions during the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. The Quad has become a more institutionalized due to this cooperation. Trilateral SAREX can be conducted beyond the Indo-Pacific region and could eventually be an essential asset for TSC.

Cooperation between the US-Japan Extended Deterrence Dialogue (hereafter "EDD") and the ROK-US Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group (hereafter "EDSCG") is also an agenda to consider for future TSC. The ROK-US Nuclear Consultative Group differs from the Nuclear Planning Group in that it is designed in a bilateral framework, which differs from the Nuclear Planning Group. NCG is in the development process for nuclear-conventional integration (hereafter, 'CNI'). Such a unique cooperation between the ROK and the US would necessitate some time to mature. Meanwhile, the three nations can exchange views on EDD and EDSCG in dealing with DPRK nuclear threats. This is certainly worth discussing among the three parties.

Creating a public-private working group for trilateral cooperation could also be an agenda. This would be a 1.5-track meeting that should

occur frequently, preferably quarterly. This public-private working group aims to explore new agendas and monitor the existing agendas. This would work to check and balance the governmental-based dialogue and to work towards evaluating agendas. Another role that this group can play is mitigating trilateral relations. As previously argued, trilateral relations depend primarily on domestic politics. Properly assessing domestic politics and explaining TSC to domestic audiences would be crucial. In this regard, the private sector should lead this public-private working group.

While multiple agendas can be proposed, the three abovementioned agendas are the ones that three can work within the initial stage. Again, the key to successful TSC is sustainability. There could be different agendas and directions along the way, but as long as the cooperation is sustained, three may find a breakthrough. Until then, efforts by the three to increase sustainability through institutionalization would be the most productive way to enhance mini-multilateral cooperation and preserve the peace and prosperity of the region.

3. Establishing a Secretariat

The 2023 Camp David Summit produced a document titled “Commitment to Consult.”⁴⁸ This is a unique document published along with the joint statement and principles of cooperation. The document underscores the importance of the “three nations consulting trilaterally with each other, in an expeditious manner, to coordinate our responses to regional challenges, provocations, and threats affecting our collective interests and security.”⁴⁹ In the face of external threats, three nations will “share information,” “align” messaging, and “coordinate response actions.”⁵⁰ While this commitment neither supersedes the two ROK-US

48 The White House, “Commitment to Consult,” 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/commitment-to-consult/>.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

and US-Japan bilateral treaties nor plays the role of a collective security mechanism, it confirms the necessity of close and timely consultation among the three nations when there is a threat. The central command that connects the three regularly is necessary to satisfy such a demand.

In this context, establishing a secretariat would be something the three nations could consider. To implement the outcomes of the Camp David Summit, it is imperative to establish an efficient secretariat capable of planning annual meetings, coordinating trilateral multi-domain exercises, and adjusting existing and new agendas. A secretariat will work closely with three foreign ministries to resolve any issues and prevent problems between and among the three nations. The Quad and AUKUS do not have a secretariat and may even work efficiently without one. However, the leaders have agreed on multiple agendas over the Camp David Summit that the three parties must work together down the road. To increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the TSC, it is critical to set up a secretariat promptly.

The TSC secretariat will work as a central command where planning, consulting, and implementing the TSC agendas will occur. In this regard, the TSC secretariat should comprise officials from the three foreign and defense ministries. Although most of the agendas discussed in the Camp David Summit would be prepared by foreign ministries, trilateral multi-domain exercises would be handled by defense ministries. Since there are only three members for TSC, each can take turns serving as the head of the TSC secretariat. Moreover, several venues can be considered for the TSC secretariat. Since the two out of three nations in the region are located in the West Pacific, it will make more sense to set up a secretariat in ROK or Japan. In this regard, Incheon or Yokohama could be possible options to consider. While not as crowded as Seoul and Tokyo, they are both harbors and easily accessible to capitals.

V. Conclusion

The need for TSC exponentially increases in tandem with regional threats, especially those made by DRPK nuclear and missile programs. In this regional security environment, ROK-US-Japan TSC seems inevitable. After the Camp David Summit, the three nations are working together to advance the level of cooperation and institutionalizing the agendas. In this light, this research analyzed the efforts made by the three nations for cooperation in the past, reviewed the agendas discussed in the Camp David Summit, and proposed a roadmap that the three governments could refer to in the short and long term. One of the suggestions this research made is three nations establishing a secretariat. The sooner, the better.

One caveat is that three nations may have different views on each agenda and may not come to an agreement in dealing with them. For example, while ROK's primary TSC agenda may be to deter DPRK nuclear and missile threats, the US and Japan may have different priority in TSC. The three must talk more frequently and manage differences. If not, the routine, from TCOG and TISA may be repeated. Returning to the discussion of realism in international relations, there will be a significant loss in national interest if TSC is dissolved. Therefore, the three need to work out the differences. In this regard, TSC requires a venue for discussion, in other words, establishing as secretariat.

TSC can be complementary to the ROK-US alliance. Deterring provocations and containing threats posed by the DPRK is a primary objective of the alliance. The ROK-US alliance, which began as a blood alliance, now holds a vision of Global Comprehensive Strategic Alliance. The allies will work beyond the Peninsula and deal with various agendas. When this is realized, the ROK will truly become a Global Pivotal State. To accomplish all of these visions and goals, TSC is essential. A balanced division of labor between the alliance and TSC will be the key to achieving the vision of Global Pivotal State. With this in mind, the ROK government should cautiously but proactively promote TSC.

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