

# Assessing the prospect of the new trilateral cooperation between the US, Japan, and Korea\*

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## 〈Abstract〉

Since 2015, the US, Japan, and Korea have maintained a cooperative relationship. This relationship has reached a turning point. This partnership has avowed deeper engagement and is to be annually regularized by the three leaders from 2023. This study examines how the three countries must overcome their issues to cooperate better and enter a new era. However, additional steps are required to foster this nascent relationship. First, there are different security agendas and priorities among the three countries. Second, the trilateral relationship in Northeast Asia has never been successful, and cooperation has never continued, especially in the field of security aspect. Third, this cooperation is mainly based on the US influence. Fourth, the three countries lack geographical proximity and have loopholes for gatherings by developed countries. In sum, 2024 would be a real testing time because of the upcoming political schedules in Japan, Korea and the US.

\*Keywords: US - Japan - Korea, US - Japan Alliance, Korea - Japan Relations, Trilateralism, Trilateral Summit

## 1. Introduction

The US - Japan - Korea relationship reached a turning point in 2023, when the US President Joe Biden invited Japanese Prime Minister Fumio

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Kishida and Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol to a trilateral summit at Camp David. President Biden reiterated that it was the first ever standalone summit with the two key US allies and it aimed to advance the security and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region and beyond (Table 1). Is this a new era for these three countries? How will the new trilateral partnership be accepted by China and North Korea? What challenges and obstacles must be overcome to develop the new trilateral partnership?

〈Table 1〉 US-Japan-Korea gathering during Obama, Trump, and Biden Administration

President	Diplomatic Contents			Note
Obama	2014. 3.	<b>Trilateral Summit</b>	Hague	Nuclear Summit
	2016. 1.	Vice-Ministerial Meeting	Tokyo	
	2016. 3.	<b>Trilateral Summit</b>	Washington	
	2016. 4.	Vice-Ministerial Meeting	Seoul	
	2016. 7	Vice-Ministerial Meeting	Hawaii	
	2016. 9.	Ministerial Meeting	New York	
Trump	2017. 1.	Vice-Ministerial Meeting	Washington	
	2017. 7.	<b>Trilateral Summit</b>	Hamburg	G20 Summit
	2018. 1.	Ministerial Meeting	Tokyo	
	2018. 2.	<b>Trilateral Summit</b> (Vice-President)	Pyongchang	2018 Olympic
	2018. 6.	Ministerial Meeting	Seoul	
	2019. 8.	Ministerial Meeting	Bangkok	ASEAN+3
Biden	2020. 1.	Ministerial Meeting	Silicon Valley	
	2021. 6.	Ministerial Meeting	London	G7 Summit
	2021. 7.	Vice-Ministerial Meeting	Tokyo	
	2021. 9.	Special Representative for DPRK	Tokyo	
	2021.10.	Special Representative for DPRK	Washington	
	2021.11.	Vice-Ministerial Meeting	Washington	
	2022. 2.	Ministerial Meeting	Hawaii	
	2022. 6.	Special Representative for DPRK	Seoul	
	2022. 6.	Vice-Ministerial Meeting	Seoul	
	2022. 6.	<b>Trilateral Summit</b>	Madrid	NATO Summit
	2023. 2.	Vice-Ministerial Meeting	Washington	
	2023. 7.	Ministerial meeting	Jakarta	
	2022.11.	<b>Trilateral Summit</b>	Phnom Penh	EA Summit
	2023. 5.	<b>Trilateral Summit</b>	Hiroshima	G7 Summit
	2023. 8.	<b>Trilateral Summit</b>	Camp David	<b>Independent</b>
	2024. 1.	Deputy Ministerial Meeting	Washington	
	2024. 2.	Ministerial Meeting	Rio de Janeiro	G20 Summit

\*Source: Compiled by author

This study aims to reveal that, first, through the US - Japan - Korea summit in 2023, the trilateral cooperation became institutionalized and more solidified. Second, it aims to not only understand the interests and pursuits of each country through the US-led trilateral cooperation, but also analyze specific gains and losses. Third, though this trilateral cooperation was institutionalized and the US side evaluates it as a ‘new era’ and ‘irreversible’<sup>1)</sup>, there remain unresolved issues between Korea and Japan, as well as the inevitable political limitations of the trilateral cooperation.

There are questions about how different the US - Japan - Korea trilateral cooperation is from the existing regional cooperation, and whether it can function anew. In practice, cooperation among the three countries has not been properly launched and overseen. The China - Japan - Korea (CJK) cooperation is one such example. However, the CJK cooperation did not progress as before since the pandemic. The Australia - New Zealand - United States (ANZUS) Treaty serves as a military alliance. The US - Japan - Australia and the US - Japan - India relations are regarded as a separate trilateral initiative. Ultimately, the countries decided to regularize the initiative through the summit held at Camp David and to solidify cooperation in base areas, including student exchanges. However, responses to questions on how long it can continue to function are mixed. Besides, although the talks defined the partnership as ‘irreversible,’<sup>2)</sup> the US presidential election is expected to be the primary testing time. A substantial agreement has been reached, but the interests promoted by the US, Japan, and Korea are not homogeneous. Therefore, there is a possibility that it will be ‘deja-vu’ rather than a ‘new era’.

This study reviews the US - Japan - Korea relations, drawing attention to the opportunities and limitations that institutionalized trilateral cooperation provides in promoting trust. It begins by briefly highlighting the sources of mistrust that prevent deeper cooperation from developing in Northeast Asia. It then discusses the development and rationale behind the US -

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1) <https://www.whitehouse.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/>. accessed 18 February 2024

2) *Ibid.*

Japan - Korea trilateralism. Two issues lie at the crux of trilateralism in Northeast Asia. First, can trilateral cooperation truly exist in the absence of robust bilateral relations? Second, and relatedly, does institutionalized cooperation have any real effect on regional peace and stability? These inquiries are central to understanding and recognizing the US - Japan - Korea cooperation. We argue that the trilateral summit has some positive effects on addressing non-controversial issues and building trust.

The research questions are as follows. Before trilateral cooperation was not framed but it was regularized, is that improved? Or what are those of constraints? What are the main agendas for explaining the theories and cases? As a methodological aspect of this study, various stages of regional cooperation and strategic triangles were used as frameworks for analysis. Additionally, there are a few cases in which trilateral relations are continuously and steadily working. Through the past US - Japan - Korea cooperation, ANZUS alliance, and CJK cooperation, the functioning and steady implementation of the US-led trilaterals can be predicted. Crucially, it is predicted that Korea - Japan relations will improve in the composition of the US-led trilateral agreement. However, one side has not changed its attitude toward Korea, and it has brought no diplomatic benefit to Korea hitching its impartial bandwagon to Japan.

## **2. Trust vacuum of Northeast Asia and the US-led trilateral cooperation**

The US, Japan, and Korea are enlarged economies in the Asia-Pacific region, playing a decisive role in regional stability and future prosperity (Jo & Mo 2010; Wirth 2015a). A trilateral format for talks was triggered by North Korea's nuclear crisis and China's rise in mid-2010 (Rozman 2007). However, in 2022, this framework was established to explore the possibilities of ensuring closer security cooperation and policy implementation. It can contribute to stabilizing a region characterized by

growing tensions and security risks.

However, why does the US want to push for trilateral cooperation? The US needed to respond to the rise of China and the North Korean nuclear crisis. The global financial crisis added to the country's financial burden; it tried to manage the region, focusing on the US-Japan alliance to enhance Japan's role (Rozman 2007; Wirth 2015b). The Obama administration tried to respond effectively by connecting with its major US allies. In the Asia-Pacific region, the US treaty allies can not only serve as developed countries but also view China and North Korea simultaneously. By connecting the US-Japan and US-Korea alliances, key US bilateral military alliances,<sup>3)</sup> Washington intended to take Japan as a 'pivot' and manage the region. It can be assumed that the US chose Japan as the middle manager to resolve diplomatic issues (Campbell 2016). The US strategically designed a US-led trilateral cooperation with its major allies in East Asia.

The US-Japan-Korea trilateral cooperation was positively analyzed under the Obama administration. Haggard and Yu (2017) reported that trilateral cooperation is a progressive step in evaluating regional security. Wirth (2015a; 2015b) iterated the US policy Japan as a pivot for its strategy. It was strategically enhanced Japan's authority under the US leadership in Asia. After that, usually since Obama administration, Washington had designed trilateral cooperation including Japan as a critical backbone. By contrast, Moon and Hur (2017) pointed out that if Seoul indulged in trilateral cooperation, Korea cannot avoid security dependence. Korea's access is easily limited against North Korea and China. In Korea, it was usually debatable to discuss whether Korea could be a part of trilateral cooperation or not. Korea will lose diplomatic fulcrum on regional agenda. However, scholars who mostly think Korea would heavily bandwagon on the US alliance sketched that the country will be member of US strategies, even though with Japan as well. Jo & Mo (2010) and

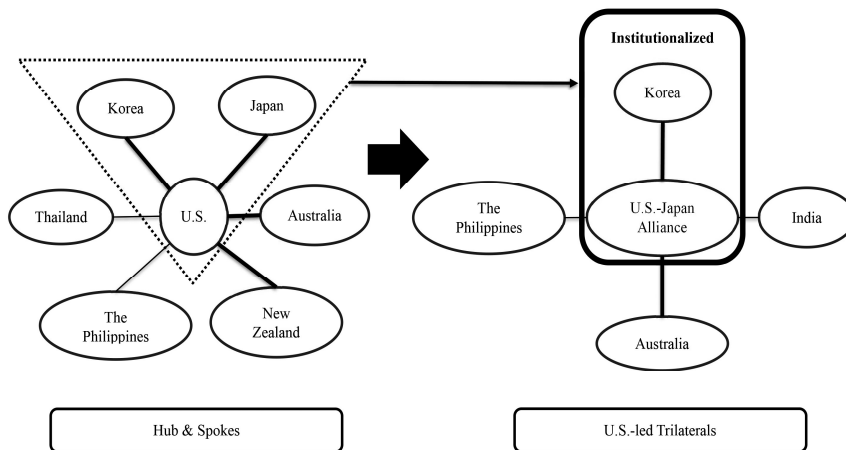
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3) <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/23/japan-u-s-joint-leaders-statement-strengthening-the-free-and-open-international-order/>. accessed 15 February 2024

Nam (2010) evaluated the trilateral cooperation positively as a diplomatic tool for fulfilling regional agenda. At that time, Pyongyang not only initiated nuclear testaments and missile launches, but it also testified a couple of cannon fires to Korea's island. So, Seoul could need to more build-up to securitize with the US and its allies. Yoshimatsu (2014) emphasized the difficulty of having an institutionalized partnership in East Asia. Furthermore, in Northeast Asia, it could be problematic to develop a security agenda based on regional complexes, such as North Korea and other potential confrontations (Wang & Stevens 2021). However, as intended by Washington, the institutionalized framework among the three countries is centered on major US allies, and the security issues is an advanced result. This is significant because it has created an institutionalized organization with security as its main agenda.

Based on research on CJK cooperation, Zhang (2018) compared CJK relations with US - Japan - Korea relations. He examined when the Sino-Japanese rivalry emerged, with specific issues that had not operated on summit track; on the contrary, the US was an engager when Korea and Japan had struggled with many issues. Washington usually intervened in this relationship to team up with the US. Additionally, CJK was correlated with socioeconomic cooperation for nascent countries, whereas the US-led cooperation works on security affairs. This entails the limits of institutionalization in Northeast Asia, and is less meaningful for security cooperation. In sum, in the US - Japan - Korea cooperation, both institutionalization and security issues can be seen as intertwined, and as both issues have never functioned appropriately in the region, there are considerable questions about the sustainability of the trilateral cooperation. Lee (2023a) valued trilateral cooperation is complementary of the US-Korea alliance. Among them, the core agenda was to share real-time information on North Korea's missile launch and to institutionalize and regularize the talks with various channels. On the contrary, this trilateral engagement is already proved not to be limited on North Korea, as well as there is an aspect that promotes the continuation of cooperation between China, Russia and North Korea.

[Figure 1] US security framework in the Indo-Pacific region



\*Source: Compiled by author

The US and Japan should take this as an opportunity to further expand the existing US - Japan alliance. Of the three countries, Korea is ranked the most inferior. However, current Seoul only considers it 'US - Korea alliance 2.0.' It can be viewed as an 'expanded version of the US - Japan alliance,' and strictly speaking, the US - Korea alliance can become a substructure of the US - Japan alliance. However, it can also be viewed as Korea becoming a frontliner of a proxy war or a completely dependent variable of the US - Japan alliance. This trilateral cooperation is not a trilateral alliance, like ANZUS. In other words, it is essential to determine whether the cooperation structure is a combination of the US - Korea and US - Japan alliances. The CJK summit is not held whenever there is an inconvenience; thus, there is no institutionalized organization for security issues and no successful precedent cannot be overlooked (Wang & Stevens 2021).

Nevertheless, it can be said that the US has approached at least the establishment of the Northeast Asian version of NATO through this institutionalized trilateralization. There is much room to see whether it has laid the foundation for entering a security cooperation. The US wants to keep China's expansion and North Korea's nuclear situation in check, but

lessen the burden. Therefore, the US wanted to make Japan a vital pivot in its strategy. In this context, it is obvious that Japan wants to justify its regional influences and freely intervene in the Korean Peninsula. However, even though the US-Korea alliance could adequately respond to Pyongyang's provocation, Korea brought on Japan, an unnecessary variable, making it challenging to exercise independent diplomatic authority. Above all, bringing Japan in as a security partner not only contributed to the convergence of continental forces but also helped lose its position as a future coordinator for North Korean issues.

### **3. Rise of trilateralism and rally of the US - Japan - Korea cooperation**

Security and economics are largely representative of regional cooperation. However, no cooperation encompasses both sectors. NATO is an illustrative example of the security field, and the European Union (EU) that of economic cooperation. Region-wise, the ANZUS is a security alliance, whereas the CJK cooperation functions as a socioeconomic channel (Zhang 2018; 2020).

There are four main categories of international linkage activities. First is regionalization, an area with homogeneity within the same culture. It stipulates that cultural similarities between countries can be sequentially promoted (Hoshiro 2013). The second is regional cooperation, which strengthens a cooperative stance with the same regional orientation, through which they reduce unexpected variables that may occur outside (Drysdale & Armstrong 2010). For example, promoting a common agenda in the environmental sector or conflict mitigation. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is representative in the trade field. Especially in East Asia, most states are already interested in building a multilayered framework to deepen their structure, considering political clashes and historical configurations (Yoshimatsu 2014). The third factor is



regionalism. As part of a more advanced regional cooperation, regionalism should be strengthened based on the same purpose, and be a prelude to regional integration (Hoshiro 2013). For instance, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a symbolic organization. The fourth is regional integration. This is the final stage of reaching an agreement, including economic integration and a regional framework equivalent to a single national body (Nye 1968). The EU is the best example of regionalized integration.

Regionalism often begins with a European-centered discourse, for example, and is often based on economy and trade. For security cooperation, the scenario is completely different. Since World War II, Japan has relied on the US for security because it cannot operate troops. It is thoroughly dependent on its alliance with the US. In most cases, alliances often coexist despite gaps in military capabilities. However, in the case of the US and Japan, the alliance is thoroughly asymmetric because Japan does not have a military. Therefore, Tokyo has to work with Washington to ensure its security. Additionally, there are economic reasons underlying the intention of the US to entrust part of its regional management to Tokyo. Washington has partially accepted Japan's pursuit of rearmament because of China's rise and North Korea's nuclear crisis, both of which occurred simultaneously. Recently, democratic governments in the US have been involved in regional issues through trilateral cooperation with Japan and Korea. The US wanted to reduce its fiscal burden, Japan wanted to become a regional power, and Korea wanted to diminish its security threat.

However, Korea has a pitfall that could make it vulnerable to security threats. The Russia-Ukraine clearly demonstrates that hasty camp selection can sometimes promote war. Although Korea is dealing with excessive trilateralization and other threats, it has learned from the THAAD issue that if it focuses on trilateral cooperation, Korea can be targeted (Lee 2023b; Moon & Hur 2017). This implies that there is no need to increase regional tension through a trilateral mechanism beyond the alliance. However, Korea, under the early Park Geun-hye government, maintained

its strategic partnership with China (Lee 2023b). Taken together, Korea is in a diplomatic trap behind the trilateral relationship (Moon & Hur 2017). The country cannot de-secure due to North Korea; It is likely that China considers Korea subordinate to the US and Japan, rather than a diplomatic partner, under the current government. Additionally, Pyongyang is outside Seoul's management.

Thus far, trilateral cooperation has been aligned between regional cooperation and regionalism. First, the US - Japan - Korea cooperation is especially tied to security affairs (Cummings 2016; Liu 2018; Nam 2010). Previously, the partnership was aimed at managing North Korea using a diplomatic approach. However, the trilateralized cooperation is fully accessible, from joint naval drills to summit meetings (Haggard & Yu 2017; *The Guardian*, 8 July 2016). In organizations like the NATO, there is a secretariat and secretary-general; however, a trilateral cooperation does not have such specific positions. Second, the cooperation was fully institutionalized and is to be regularized annually. Finally, it opened into a regionalism-based channel. The US and its allies compromised to conclude that it could be 'irreversible'.<sup>4)</sup> However, it is difficult to determine whether cooperation will be really institutionalized or not. As of 2024, if the governmental changes in the US, and later in Korea, it may be likely that this agreed network will not work. This does not mean that it is fully covered for institutionalizing.

Additionally, to explain the security agenda to be regionalized, this cooperation is not yet fully built up, like NATO. It is at an initial stage of institutionalization, and is not really prepared to build up. Regardless of how institutionalized cooperation is reborn, hastily predicting that institutionalization has been carried out as the US intends is challenging; additionally, it is not easy to select an agenda when bilateral relations go awry. By contrast, Zhang (2018; 2020) explained in detail the trilateralism and bilateral nexus that occurred in the region. Trilateralism is most

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4) <https://www.whitehouse.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/>. accessed 18 February 2024

influenced by bilateral relations; if the bilateral relationship goes awry, it is challenging for the trilateralized access to work properly. Since trilateralism is the most mini-lateralized relationship in multilateralism, it has been suggested that when the bilateral relationship is unsuitable, it not only tests the functioning of the trilateralism but also makes it difficult to regularize it properly. Thus if Korea - Japan relations struggle, the US can mediate for improvement as the only independent variable within and outside the framework. However, although it is only a dependent variable, it is critical to determine the level at which Korea can accept it. The Trump administration did not intervene much, unlike the previous administrations (Beeson 2020; Pempel 2019). Korea, under the Moon Jae-in administration, received it flexibly and was able to go out hard on one side (Jung et al. 2021; Lee 2024; Lee 2023b). By contrast, the Biden administration pushed for trilateralization. Seoul was sympathetic to the diplomatic approach to Pyongyang's provocation on a limited basis (Lee 2024).<sup>5)</sup> There is a big difference now, in that Korea accepts Biden's suggestion that the US wants unconditionality and is accepting the same, even though trilateral cooperation is aimed at China.<sup>6)</sup>

For a detailed analysis, the strategic triangle involves countries that meet each other's interests, forming a consultative body or dealing with regional issues and security. This is because the interests of each state matched, and many of the three parties have already formed agreed-upon relations in the Indo-Pacific region under the US leadership. For example, US - Japan - Australia and US - Japan - India are demonstrative; this relationship is also expanding to US - Japan - Philippines. Beijing also agreed to build a relation leading to CJK, and various forms of trilateral cooperation have been formed (Yeo 2017). Among them, the US has formed ANZUS, and improved its relations with Korea and Japan. Washington is building

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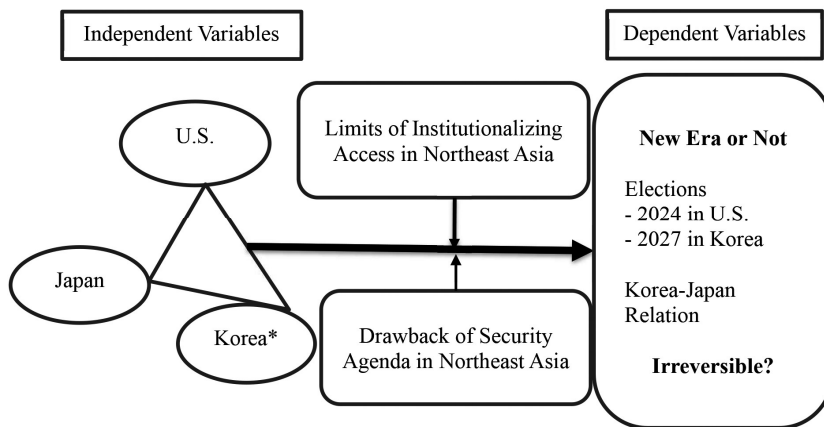
5) <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/05/21/u-s-rok-leaders-joint-statement/>. accessed 15 February 2024

6) <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/06/16/joint-readout-of-trilateral-meeting-between-the-national-security-advisors-of-the-united-states-japan-and-the-philippines/>. accessed 18 February 2024

multilateral relations to strengthen its interests as well as manage the region, it has established trilateral (or multilateral) relations with a few powers in the region to manage the order.

Not all countries that created strategic triangular structures had the same interests. However, in East Asia (Beeson & Li 2012; Chung & Kim 2023) and Europe (Kahn-Nisser 2022), the US (Miscik et al. 2023) was used to avoid subordination because of its increasing trade dependence on China during the post-Cold War period (Chen 1990; Lee 2023b; Liu & Liu 2019). In addition, middle powers with similar intentions accepted trilateral (or multilateral) cooperation in which Washington was involved, as they could not avoid China's diplomatic glances if they tried to improve excessive bilateral relations with the US. During the Obama administration, Biden, Blinken, and Sullivan were the architects of the three-way mechanism, bringing in both Korea and Japan (Liu 2018). It was already predicted early on that President Biden would solidify the trilateral cooperation.

[Figure 2] Variable setting in the research framework



\* Source: Compiled by author

According to the strategic triangle, the structure can be partially identified. In most cases, the relationship between regional powers at outer regional variants is examined through the analytical framework. The reasons for the composition of the three-party system were as follows: (1)

description (Dittmer 1981), (2) ideas or principles (Segal 1980), and/or (3) use as a framework for analysis. The outline of the trilateral relationship was analyzed into two types defined as ‘simple’ and ‘complex’ (Holbraad 1979).

First, simple trilateral relations refer to a mixture of cooperation and/or conflicts between each country (Holbraad 1979). When looking at the trilateral relationship between the US, Japan, and Korea, it has been decided whether to rely too much on the US and Japan or to join only strategic acceptance, depending on the tendency of the Korean government. In addition, disputes between Korea and Japan that began with a colonial history; therefore, the three parties did not necessarily establish a peaceful relationship, as in the current picture. Since the Korean War, the US has signed military alliances with Japan and Korea to build the core of its East Asian strategy and ease security and reduce the economic burden. Trilateralization has been more actively promoted in the Biden administration than under Obama (Lee 2024). Simultaneously, in one-sided trilateral relations, for example, in US-Japan-Korea, the country that creates the structure has the same advantage as the US, but sometimes brokers or intervenes in the event of a conflict between the two countries to improve the relationship (Chen 1990). However, as another example, there was a trilateral relationship during the US-Soviet Cold War, because the two countries kept a check on each other. China too considered the Soviet Union a rival, so the US tried to increase its power as it began to improve relations with China (Holbraad 1979).

Complex trilateral relations refer to alliances of middle (or small-sized) powers (Holbraad 1979; Kuik 2021). This refers to the so-called union of countries located in a region that are influenced by external forces. However, this realistically implies that it is used to drag a triangle. After Japan emerged post its involvement in the Cold War, Japan started to improve its relations with India. Furthermore, as the communist world ultimately collapsed and diplomatic relations between China and Japan were established, Japan was able to bring up Asia’s powerful triangle between the Soviet Union, China, and India.<sup>7)</sup> In other words, the discussion of the ‘complex triangle’ cited herein may be regarded simply as

inappropriate for the trilateral relationship that currently leads to the US - Japan - Korea. However, in East Asia, the trilateral mechanism leading to CJK continues to function (Bong 2015; Yeo 2017). In view of the trilateral partnership, the Biden administration took advantage of Korea's government change. Through this, the US brought Korea, a manufacturer of high-tech fields, and Japan, which provides strategic materials to its side. Washington further sought to reorganize its supply chain by inviting Southeast Asian countries based on the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF).

In summary, the current trilateral cooperation is intended to link not only security interests but also supply chain management. It should be interpreted that the US is ultimately thinking of reorganizing the US-centered supply chain (Lee 2024; Park 2023). However, the naturally promoted trilateral partnership has a catch. First, Korea was the dependent variable for cooperation. Unlike any other trilateral relationship, Japan is riding on the US as comprehensively as before (Bong 2015; Noboru 2015; Smith 2015). Second, Trump is a tremendously unexpected variable. The former President expressed his intention to shift all transfer all policies implemented by Biden. Otherwise, it relates to constructive and sustainable cooperation.

#### 4. Trilateralism and the prospects for Northeast Asia

As a result of various region-based cooperations and strategic trilateral relations, the current US - Japan - Korea relations can be partially defined as existing theoretical criteria. When using the analytical framework according to the stage of regional cooperation and specificity of trilateral engagement, limitations can be found based on previous cases and relationships in offshore regions. Therefore, this study analyzes the various problems and diplomatic restrictions of this trilateral cooperation.

First, the three countries must agree on common objectives and share a

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7) Since China and the Soviet Union were rivals, and India is a non-aligned country, other studies are needed to determine whether this can be defined as a full trilateral relationship.

joint commitment to fulfill the promises of the trilateral partnership. The US, Japan, and Korea do not share homogeneous objectives or perceptions of regional security in Northeast Asia. They have collective targets, but political questions regarding how many shared aims there will be remain. The three countries do have shared values: liberal democracies, market-based economies, and international human rights (Haggard & Yu 2017). However, in the diplomatic field, the ultimate goals of the three states are heterogeneous. At the very least, while the US stabilizes in the region, Japan could take real regional power and Washington's pivot in East Asia. Thus, Tokyo's perspective is similar to that of Washington, but non-US countries would not be comparable, in that the US should be eager.

The US intensively aims to stabilize the Indo-Pacific region for containing China. Since China's rise, Washington has been trying to check and pressure Beijing. Initially, the Quad contained China, but it was somewhat ambiguous because of India's status (Sullivan de Estrada 2023). Thus, through full-scale trilateral cooperation, the US aims to target China by taking advantage of the change in the Korean government (Lee 2024; Nam & Song 2022; Rozman 2023; Sheen 2022). Japan hopes to become a regional power in general with American hegemony (Yoshimatsu 2014), manage North Korea, and intervene in the Korean peninsula. However, Japan is overriding the US strategies. Even as Tokyo serves as a diplomatic pivot in the US, Japan seeks to increase its influence in the region through trilateral engagements. In contrast, Korea's target is not well framed and is too vague to build this cooperation. Under the current government, whether Seoul is eager to upgrade the version of the US - Korea alliance remains unclear and ambiguous (Wang & Stevens 2021). The Yoon administration, which argued with a different government to deal with clarity, has tackled antagonism against North Korea. However, the current trilateral cooperation also covers against China. This negatively influences the benefits of trade in Korea. In other words, the three players' purposes are heterogeneous within the partnership.

Consequently, the common goals of the three countries rarely overlap.

According to the results of the summit, there is a shared part between the three parties, but it should be viewed as a device for the US to control China. There are many areas in which each goal can be evaluated differently; thus, and whether cooperation can continue in the future remains to be seen.

Second, the three countries must pay attention to overcoming the long historical challenges and political obstacles caused by the troublesome bilateral relationships between Japan and Korea. In particular, the Korea - Japan relationship is a bilateral tie that makes it difficult to find a common point of contact. Although both countries are major allies of the US, the relationship between them is difficult to resolve. Among them, Korea - Japan relations are the worst among the US allies. Similarly, Australia and New Zealand continue to cooperate in the Pacific Region. However, only Korea - Japan relations are at odds whenever there are matters. Neither country has been able to resolve historical issues (Moon & Hur 2017). In addition, bilateral relations deteriorated when Japan continued to impose export sanctions on Korea during Moon's administration. Maritime disputes have not yet been resolved, and nuclear-contaminated water has been added to the list of issues affecting the relations of the two countries.<sup>8)</sup> After the change in the Korean government, there was a clear disagreement between the positions of citizens, although it was very conciliatory with Japan. That is, since the issues seem to have been resolved, there is room for bilateral issues to become obstacles to this trilateral cooperation in the future (Nam & Song 2022; Rozman 2023).

Looking at the three governments in Korea recently, diplomacy toward Japan has not continued. First, in the early days of the Park administration, Korea was pessimistic about discussions with Japan. However, Washington pressured Korea to focus on improving relations with Japan, rather than with China, and signed the Japanese Military Sexual Slavery Agreement and GSOMIA (Moon & Hur 2017). Second,

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8) [https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m\\_5676/view.do?seq=321629](https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=321629). accessed 31 March 2024



the relationship between Moon's Korea and Japan depreciated because of Tokyo's export sanctions. Before and after the sanction, the Korean government withdrew the previously agreed agreement on Sexual Slavery (Moon & Hur 2017), and the Korean Supreme Court's sentencing on compensation for forced conscription by Japanese companies. Third, the current government unconditionally cooperated with Japan, even though there were no diplomatic advantages (Kim 2023). However, the Japanese government unilaterally decided to discharge wastewater from nuclear power plant, thereby affecting Korea. Currently, no single problem has been resolved by any government of the two countries (Hinata-Yamaguchi 2016; Rozman 2023).

In sum, the Park administration previously initiated an anti-Japanese sentiment and finally started to improve relations with Japan due to pressure from the US; by contrast, the Moon administration maintained an independent attitude toward Japan (Lee 2024). However, the Yoon administration was cooperative. In other words, Korea reacted inconsistently towards Japan, depending on the government's tendency and the situation at the time. Therefore, in this US - Japan - Korea cooperation, the matter of bilateral relations has not improved, a solution has not been found, and the bilateral issue is not on the agenda. Thus, there is room for the potential deterioration of this relationship.

Third, these three countries must overcome the historical setbacks of trilateralism in the region. There are other cooperations in Northeast Asia, including CJK cooperation, but successful trilateralism has been tough to confirm. Other trilateralized accesses have not been sufficiently developed. In Northeast Asia, the relationship between these three countries has not advanced (Zhang 2020). Thus, the US, Japan, and Korea have a history that ultimately fails to make progress in Northeast Asia.

First, a tripartite agreement is usually limited to the short term or temporary measures. For example, the CJK cooperation has been fully institutionalized for socioeconomic coordination. However, it is problematic to continue proper cooperation, as sometimes a summit is not held whenever the bilateral relationship is disrupted (Zhang 2018). Although

there was optimism at the time of its launch, it was not easy to continue economic cooperation for political reasons. Even if the region expands into East Asia, the multilateral structures of three or more parties rarely function properly, except for those based on ASEAN. That is, there is no case where more than three-way relationships have functioned properly, except for ASEAN.

Second, there is no fully functioning three-way cooperation, except for ANZUS, in both the inner and outer regions. In addition, there are a couple of US-led trilateral gatherings, such as the ANZUS treaty, the AUKUS pact (Dunley 2023; O'Connor et al. 2023; Staunton & Day 2023), and the US - Japan - Australia trilateral security dialogue<sup>9)</sup>; however, these are neither annually regularized nor highly institutionalized. So far, in the region, there has hardly been any case of building a trilateralized relationship because of meetings in the security agenda. ANZUS is a security treaty in which the three countries are allies and respond jointly to Pacific issues. There are also aspects that have no reason to institutionalize the partnerships. AUKUS is a technology transfer agreement for the construction of submarines, and these three countries are key allies. However, there is a limit to the fact that the trilateral format in the region is first based on the US - Japan alliance. Although two of the three countries are allies, the other country is not. It is far from institutionalized or regularized.

Given the basic limitations of trilateral relations and regional specificity, questions about trilateral cooperation remain unanswered. Moreover, the regional trilateral relationship may seem positive at the time of launch, but there is no consistently working consultative body at this point. Thus, it can be concluded that theoretical constraints and regional limitations exist.

Fourth, the three countries must consider the US influence and its voice. The trilateral partnership may be swayed by the US foreign policy. This US-led trilateral is not fully a three-way cooperation; it is likely to be

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9) <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3415881/united-states-japan-australia-trilateral-defense-ministers-meeting-tdmm-2023-jo/>. accessed 3 April 2024.

based on the one-plus-two structure. Washington is the leading player in this trilateral cooperation; this implies that non-US governments follow the US-led agenda. The US diplomatic strategy and security priorities were determined within the initial trilateral cooperation during Obama's presidency (Moon & Hur 2017). During the Biden administration, Washington declared that institutionalization was successful. Considering that the US ultimately accounted for a significant portion, its influence is bound to play a major role (Zhang 2018). As Korea - Japan relations have not yet improved, both countries are expected to lean on the US, instead of forming a balanced triangle. This partnership could be evaluated as a US-led hub-and-spokes structure, which can be intensified repeatedly. Of course, it is absolute that while Washington inspired the US-centered institutionalized organization, if the priorities of the US change, non-US countries will have no choice but to follow. Washington has changed its foreign policy priorities by region, with the Biden administration focusing on checking China. However, its focus on Asia is being contested due to the outbreak of wars in the outer region. The spotlight of the US policy can change at any time. Crucially, the Biden administration, like Obama, is consistent with 'strategic patience' in reaching Pyongyang's provocations, making it difficult to expect an approach to North Korea.

If it is demanding to concentrate on Asia according to US diplomatic urgencies based on strategic priorities, it is likely to be largely influenced by Japan's influence. During the Obama administration, the US prioritized Japan and pressured Korea into improving Korea - Japan relations to establish trilateral cooperation. At this point, the situation remained the same. As Obama and Biden used Japan as a pivotal player in the American strategy in East Asia, it is highly likely that Japan's role will be further enhanced (Campbell 2016). As Japan decides to increase its defense budget by up to twice by 2027,<sup>10)</sup> its increased defense spending and boosted military capabilities will inevitably increase regional tensions. After all, if Japan's position becomes stronger, how much can Korea

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10) *Ibid.*

accept? Or if Japan's role is more enhanced than it is now, Korea may not accept it. This is because no issues have been resolved between the two players, and Seoul has approached it in too conciliatorily a manner. It is difficult for Korea to admit it as the previous agreement. If the influence of Japan, not the US, increases, it will be difficult for Korea to take it in a surprise move like the original plan. That is, how solid will the institutionalized cooperation between the three parties be? Or will it remain a simple consultative body to discuss diplomatic issues? It is challenging to assess whether this trilateral cooperation will function appropriately unless the US is unresponsive or does not pay much attention to it. Although the Quad was built as a track between leaders in accordance with Biden's intentions, India and Australia did not actively agree with the establishment of anti-China sentiments (Needam & Jose 2024; Sullivan de Estrada 2023).

Finally, the three countries must overcome other disadvantages, such as geographical proximity and gatherings by advanced countries. First, trilateral gatherings are usually based on close distances to improve procedure validity. As the specificity that comes from relationships exists, comparisons with consensus from other countries and continents are not entirely correct; however, geographic accessibility and shared interests are at least critical. Even though pan-regional concepts, such as the Asia-Pacific region, ANZUS is a special case because of its homogeneous ethno-based alliances. This means that most multilateral cooperation for successful building is reflected in geographical determinism. Washington is geographically distant from Seoul and Tokyo. Furthermore, in the case of trilateral ties between advanced states, there will be conflicts of interest within this relationship. Although the three countries have something in common, in addition to gathering security, sharing profits is also crucial. As mentioned in the first case in this chapter, the common interests of security guarantees are set, but as there are different aspects. Moreover, as indicated in the second case, there are limitations due to the eventual improvement of the relationship between Korea and Japan (Moon & Hur 2017; Zhang 2018).

## 5. Conclusion

The Biden administration has focused on creating a framework for US-led trilateral cooperation. The White House described the US - Japan - Korea trilateral cooperation as entering a 'new era.' However, there are limitations in terms of not going into specifics and agreements. This analysis shows that political doubts about how new this relationship can be, as suggested by the US, remain, given that there are heterogeneous aspects of the relationship, unlike any other trilateral mechanism, leaving room for disruption.

Right now, it can be concluded that this is meaningful for regional stability. However, there is a probability of problems occurring later. If trilateralization is pursued excessively, other countries are likely to become associated with Northeast Asia; therefore, the regional environment is likely to become too controversial as a confrontation between continental and maritime forces. When referring to various issues that have investigated this study, it is not easy to diagnose the ushering in of a 'new era.'

The limitations of the channel were highlighted through the analyses conducted in this study. The fundamental problems of the three-party system, the limitations of multilateral engagement, including the three parties with security issues in Northeast Asia, and the various diplomatic tasks within the US, Japan, and Korea have not yet been resolved. The trilateral engagement and security agenda will never function properly. Uncertainty about the future remains, as variables that are not easy to overcome, such as Korea - Japan relations, have been added.

The partnership is likely to see a serious testing time and get an intertwined political timetable: policy coordination of Korea administrations. Trilateral cooperation was reiterated, but the issues of disputes that could hold were not put on the agenda. Even with Korea's future bandwagon

cooperation, what level of engagement will be achieved? Even if the US - Japan alliance is solid and the positions are almost the same, there is bound to be a difference in the perception of external threats. Moreover, Korea is at the forefront of confrontational phases. However, the US has the authority to control operations during wartime. Seoul also has a heterogeneous situation and alignment to follow Washington.

In summary, there is a significant agreement. This is because the three nations have not only institutionalized it for the first time but also decided to enhance it. However, although the positions of the three players appear to be significantly similar, their strategic perceptions differ in detail. The key to this is how well they can overcome these issues, which have been investigated in this study. As agreed upon in 2023, it is crucial whether the summit will take place in 2024 or later. The first test is expected to be in November 2024. However, the question remains as to how effectively the channel will be able to continue if there is a change in US government.

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## 국문요약

### 새로운 한미일 3국 협력 평가 및 향후 전망

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2015년 이후 한국, 미국, 일본은 지속적으로 3국 협력관계를 유지해 왔다. 최근 3국 관계가 새로운 전환점을 맞이했다. 지난 2023년 캠프 데이비드에서 한미일 3국 정상은 3자 협력을 양적, 질적으로 고도화하고 3국 정상회의도 정례화하기로 합의하였다. 과연 한미일 3국은 이 협력을 성공적인 지역협의체로 발전할 수 있을까? 본 연구는 3국이 3자 협력 성공을 위해 극복해야 할 과제들을 살펴보는 것이 목적이다. 3국이 새로운 시대를 열고 보다 나은 협력을 위해서 해결할 과제는 무엇인가? 먼저, 3국은 서로 다른 외교·안보 과제의 격차를 극복해야 한다. 한미일은 비슷하지만 3국이 중국, 북한 등에 있어서 일치된 외교적인 입장을 항상 공유하지 못했다. 둘째, 이전에도 동북아 3국 관계는 성공한 적이 없으며, 특히 안보 분야에서 협력을 위한 노력은 있었지만, 양자 문제로 인해 지속된 적이 없었다. 셋째, 한미일 협력이라고 하지만 주로 미국의 영향력에 크게 기반하고 있어서 3국의 균형 잡힌 협력이 어려울 수 있다. 넷째, 세 나라는 지리적 인접성이 부족하고, 선진국 모임에 대한 허점이 존재한다. 끝으로, 한국, 미국, 일본의 여러 정치 일정이 예정된 2024년 이후가 한미일 3자 협력 성공의 진정한 시험대가 될 것으로 보인다.

주제어: 한미일, 미일동맹, 한일관계, 삼자주의, 한미일 정상회담