



# Completing the Triangle

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## SECURITY IN UNITY BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES, SOUTH KOREA, AND JAPAN

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Attempts by President Barack Obama to bolster U.S. military, economic, and political presence in Asia reflects the fact that East Asia will remain the most critical region for the United States over the next decades. U.S. commitments to Europe and the Middle East continue to mount, but the U.S. rebalance to Asia has strengthened the United States' position, from dedicating additional military forces to promoting the Trans Pacific Partnership trade agreement. If, however, the United States is going to play an integral part of the Asian Century and maintain its status in the region, it must do more than simply move military personnel and equipment and institute free trade agreements. The region's increasingly dynamic security situation necessitates that Washington reevaluate the way it interacts with its Asia-Pacific partners, and cement strong multilateral ties that simultaneously strengthen the U.S. position while more efficiently distributing resources, rather than relying solely on bilateral relationships.

The most obvious and beneficial trilateral relationship is between the United States, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (ROK). Japan and South Korea represent the United States' strongest partners in East Asia, and both countries are treaty allies that host sizable U.S. military presences and boast robust democratic societies that largely favor America. Much has been made of the potential U.S.-Japan-Australia relationship, as well as possibilities with the Philippines, India, and even Vietnam. But Tokyo and Seoul both look to Washington to maintain peace in the region and help them mitigate the threat posed by North Korea, which now poses one of the greatest threats to peace in Asia and beyond.

Yet building the U.S.-ROK-Japan relationship will require careful action from the United States. Historical issues between Korea and Japan have strained relations between what should be natural partners and past attempts to bolster bilateral ties have fallen short. A strong trilateral alliance in Northeast Asia will greatly depend on Washington's commitment to bring both Japan and Korea to common ground.

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### A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

The benefits of closer cooperation between Korea and Japan have been widely discussed since the mid-1990s,<sup>1</sup> but until recent months, close cooperation between South Korea and Japan seemed increasingly challenging. Grievances dating back to Imperial Japan's occupation of the Korean Peninsula in the first half of the 20th century weighed heavily on the relationship, and Seoul's attempts to grow closer to Beijing worried many in Tokyo. At the end of 2015, however, prospects for ROK-Japan cooperation began increasing. Following the first official meeting between Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Korea President Park Geun-hye in November 2015, the two countries reached an agreement at the end of December on the long-disputed "comfort women" issue—Japan would apologize for sexual slavery during World War II and ROK would let the issue rest—removing one of the most salient obstacles to better relations.

The urgency for improved relations is obvious: North Korea's recent provocations have reinforced the need for closer cooperation to counter Pyongyang. The rogue nation's fourth nuclear test on January 6 and its missile launch a month later have resulted in significant policy shift by President Park. The president was previously reluctant to allow a U.S. deployment of the advanced Terminal High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) system to South Korea, but working-level talks are now underway to iron out the details of the installation.<sup>2</sup> Park's tone toward the North has changed sharply from her previous focus on reunification and trust building,<sup>3</sup> while she has also increased communication with Prime Minister Abe. The two leaders spoke immediately after both North Korean provocations and called for ongoing coordination to counter the Kim regime, including closely working together on the latest UN sanctions and issuing unilateral sanctions.<sup>4</sup>

These changes offer a unique opportunity to reshape the security landscape in Northeast Asia. While the United States has long managed defense relations through the so-called hub and spoke system of bilateral ties centered around Washington, the Obama administration should use its final year to move toward a new trilateral security relationship to enhance security in the region. Action cannot be delayed until the next

administration since the conditions allowing for stronger trilateral ties will likely have changed by next year. Indeed, senior national security leaders in all three countries' and several U.S. foreign policy experts believe the window of opportunity to build a new U.S.-ROK-Japan relationship may be closed as soon as this summer.<sup>5</sup> Nor can the United States hope for progress in the bilateral relationship given the historical issues and governmental inertia. Instead, U.S. officials must seize on this confluence of events to lay the foundation for the long-lasting trilateral relationship that is vital to countering North Korea.

### BENEFITS OF TRILATERAL ALLIANCE

The hub-and-spoke system worked well for decades, particularly in the early stages of the Cold War when a NATO-like multilateral defense structure was impractical due to the lingering effects of World War II, but the realities of modern Asia-Pacific security necessitate a more dynamic approach. For one, Pyongyang's successive nuclear provocations have made clear China's lack of real influence over Kim Jong-un. Chinese officials have long claimed they have little leverage,<sup>6</sup> and their statements increasingly ring true. Even though China does not want a nuclear-armed North Korea, it also has legitimate concerns about implementing harsh sanctions that could potentially destabilize North Korea, which could produce a range of negative outcomes from a massive humanitarian and refugee crisis to the use of weapons of mass destruction by a desperate Kim regime. Without any clear course of action, it seems unlikely China can lead the North back to the Six Party talks, but close U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral ties could serve as new leverage to restart dialogue.

Moreover, enhanced cooperation between Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul would help to solidify the progress made with the comfort women agreement. Both Park and Abe face a domestic backlash from the deal,<sup>7</sup> but an agreement to pursue trilateral ties with the United States would show good faith with one another and with the United States. Such mutual trust is key to fully normalizing relations between Tokyo and Seoul, and multilateral cooperation has proven to be a valuable tool in building trust among traditional rivals.<sup>8</sup>

Enhanced trilateral relations would also exemplify that U.S. commitment to the region is not simply empty words. Policymakers in South Korea have expressed feelings of isolation and worry in recent weeks and there have even been calls for the South to develop its own nuclear deterrent. Others in Seoul have fretted over Japan's recent defense reforms and expressed concerns of remilitarization.<sup>9</sup> Both notions are extreme, but it speaks to an undercurrent of insecurity throughout South Korea. A trilateral alliance would alleviate such worries by reaffirming the United States' commitment to the Peninsula's stability and clarifying Japan's role in regional security.

Meanwhile in Tokyo, legislators have expressed their own feelings of isolation, especially as ROK leaders have warmed to China. China's rapid military modernization and increasingly assertive actions have created a sense of vulnerability in Japan, while a lack of firm commitment from its nearest neighbor has only exacerbated this feeling. This feeling has been a driving factor for Abe's defense reforms, including reinterpreting Article 9 of Japan's constitution to allow for collective self-defense, increasing in defense spending to a record \$42.1 billion,<sup>10</sup> and passing legislation to allow Japanese firms to export security equipment. Still, prospects for greater Japanese military engagement has faced domestic opposition among voters who prize their pacifist history since 1945 and fear that legacy will soon be gone with the prime minister's plan to create a more robust defensive capability. With its strongest partner, the United States, and its nearest democratic neighbor, South Korea, standing beside it, Japan would be both less isolated and more likely to remain peaceful through the benefits of mutual defense.

In weighing the benefits of stronger trilateral coordination, the Obama administration would be wise to consider the gains the United States stands to make as well. With the United States, Japan, and ROK working increasingly as one, U.S. forces would be shouldering less of the fiscal and strategic burden. Stronger partners results in an ease of effort for all. Furthermore, a stable U.S.-ROK-Japan alliance provides the foundation for stability in East Asia—one of the chief aims of the U.S. rebalance to Asia.

### THE HURDLES OF HISTORY AND PUBLIC OPINION

The merits of closer trilateral cooperation may be obvious, but there are challenges nonetheless. Historical issues beyond the comfort women problem have repeatedly proven a thorn in the side of the relationship between Tokyo and Seoul and several issues have become politicized and detrimental to relations. Koreans are extremely sensitive to Japanese revisionism that attempt to gloss over its colonial record during the early 20th century, such as issues regarding history textbooks or visits by Japanese officials to the Yasukuni Shrine. There is shared acrimony regarding territorial issues over the disputed Dokdo/Takeshima islands. Tensions can even flair over whether the body of water separating the two countries is called the Sea of Japan or the East Sea. For their part, the Japanese bristle when they feel forced to continually make amends for past sins or endure what they see as hypocritical attacks from Seoul.

These historical problems are not easily resolved because they either arise from or illuminate key aspects of each country's national identity. While it is easy for those outside of the region to lump Korea and Japan into a convenient basket of East Asian cultures with Confucian roots that have now embraced democracy, there are important differences in the Japanese and Korean psyche. Japan sees itself as the key U.S. partner in Asia and believes it should be recognized for its steadfast support off the alliance. This has been a source of angst several times over the past two decades such as when President Clinton seemingly bypassed Tokyo on a trip to Beijing in the 1998. More recently, when then Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel called South Korea the "linchpin" of regional security and Japan the "cornerstone", Japanese officials frantically contacted U.S. interlocutors to ascertain which term was more vital. Additionally, while still maintaining their unique position of pacifism, they also strive to been seen as a "normal" nation no longer under the long shadow of World War II.<sup>11</sup> Having to repeatedly bow low after 70 years of peace and prosperity cuts against this grain, a fact made worse considering Japan boasts the world's third largest economy yet comparatively little political influence.

South Korea likewise has a distinctive national identity. A strong sense of vulnerability has developed after centuries of being caught between the regional powers of Japan and China, which have frequently interfered with Korean sovereignty. There is also the ever-present fact that Korea remains divided and technically at war. The Koreans therefore seek to be seen as independent and to be treated as equals on the international stage, especially as South Korean economic influence continues to rise worldwide.<sup>12</sup> This sense of independence partly explains the ROK push to develop an indigenous defense industry; while economics play an important part, national pride remains a major motivation for building its own advanced fighter aircraft and missile defense system. Concerns over sovereignty have also hindered previous attempts at trilateralism, with ROK officials routinely balking at the idea of Japanese cooperation in security planning or exercises on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>13</sup>

Public appetite for greater cooperation between the two countries is also a stumbling block. According to a 2015 Pew Global poll, only 25 percent of South Koreans view Japan favorably.<sup>14</sup> The same data set shows a mere 21 percent of Japanese respondents see Korea in a positive light—a remarkable drop from the Japanese government’s figure of over 60 percent in 2011 or even the 39 percent of 2012 resulting from unusually icy relations between Seoul and Tokyo. Before the thaw in diplomatic relations began late in 2015, a Hankook Ilbo and Yomiuri Shimbun poll showed that distrust of South Korea among Japanese had soared to 73 percent while 85 percent of Koreans did not trust Japan.<sup>15</sup> Still, as bleak as the polling data appears, the numbers also leave room for optimism given the commonalities between the Japanese and Koreans. Both populations consider North Korea and China to be their primary security concerns, though in different orders.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps more importantly, both have remarkably high opinions of the United States, and according to polling by the Pacific Forum CSIS, they both most closely identify with U.S. values. After the United States, Japan and South Korea see the most similarity in each other over China, Europe, or Southeast Asia. These results serve to contrast starker public opinion polling while also highlighting

the importance of the United States’ role in engendering closer ties.

### DOWNSIDE RISK OF ILL-CONCEIVED U.S. ENGAGEMENT

Trilateral U.S.-Japan-ROK cooperation alone will not ensure regional stability. In fact, poor execution could have a destabilizing effect by making China and North Korea feel encircled and threatened. North Korea’s singular focus on survival may lead to a backlash to any action that seems to threaten its survival. In order to counteract such worries, the United States must accompany any trilateral agreement with clear messaging about U.S.-Japan-ROK intentions. One additional way to reassure Pyongyang would be an honest effort at negotiations such as the attempt by the Obama administration in early 2016 to hold talks without denuclearization, which would signal Washington’s desire for stability rather than overhauling the regime.<sup>17</sup>

Leaders in Beijing, meanwhile, also object to a strong U.S.-led alliance in Northeast Asia. As J. Berkshire Miller states, “The strained trilateral relationship has been a long-held goal for China, which aims to erode the U.S. alliance structure in East Asia—a system that partially is aimed at protecting against Chinese regional assertiveness.”<sup>18</sup> This attitude was displayed by the Chinese reaction to the possible deployment of THAAD to Korea,<sup>19</sup> but by rejecting pressure from Beijing, Seoul signaled its intention to place its security above other relationships.<sup>20</sup> This is not to say trilateral ties should be targeted at China, but rather that China will view them as such regardless of the United States’ goal. Every attempt should be made to communicate that U.S.-ROK-Japan cooperation is designed for regional stability, and the United States should reach out to China for its participation in certain situations. Still, regardless of Beijing’s opinion, the United States, Japan, and South Korea must put long-term stability and prosperity above smooth relations with the China over the short run.

### FROM HERE TO THERE

While not new, calls for better trilateral coordination have grown as North Korea ramped up its nuclear program and China continued its military modernization. These

calls for action, however, have lacked practical recommendations on strengthening the U.S.-Japan-ROK defense relationship. Much has been made on how to overcome historical issues that hamper cooperation such as apologies, cultural exchanges, or leadership dialogues, but in Japan and Korea, these sensitivities are often inflamed by rival parties or factions. As Scott Snyder and Brad Glosserman state when discussing alliance development since the Cold War, “Domestic political debates...demonstrated a willingness to place near-term domestic political gains ahead of international objects in ways that appeared to pit national identity against alliance cooperation.”<sup>21</sup> While U.S. government should help heal old wounds and bring its two East Asian partners closer, it must realize that politicians in both countries will seize upon old grievances when politically advantageous and alliance hopes cannot solely rest on mended fences. Instead, security cooperation should be divorced from these concerns.

Relying on leadership relationships and dialogues also fails to address the need for long lasting engagement between the two countries. President Park’s term expires in 2017, and while Prime Minister Abe appears poised to retain his position for several years, economic or other concerns could force his resignation or even propel a struggling opposition into power. Any progress in creating closer relations, therefore, cannot be dependent on personal relationships between leaders. Park’s attempts to leverage strong leadership connections into meaningful Chinese action on North Korea demonstrate the limits of this approach—interaction and discussion are valuable only when action follows.

Rather than staking a claim to trilateralism on ever-shifting political grounds and national identity, U.S. leaders should look to build on already strong military to military ties. The United States obviously enjoys healthy bilateral relationships with the two nations, considering the permanent basing of forces and frequent joint exercises, but military ties are also robust between ROK and Japan. Korea already sends the second highest number of its officers to exchanges with the Japanese military, behind only the United States. Despite wide public concern regarding Japan’s military intentions,

officials in the Blue House and the Ministry of National Defense (MND) are highly favorable of working more closely with Japan, according to a high ranking ROK officer. Similarly, former officials in Japan’s Ministry of Defense (MoD) have described stronger ties with Korea as “the only missing link” for national security.

The basic framework for U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral military engagement already exists. The U.S. Secretary of Defense routinely meets with the minister from MND and MoD on the sidelines of multilateral events, and vice ministers and assistant secretaries from the three countries hold an annual Defense Trilateral Talk (DTT). Small-scale trilateral exercises and tabletop exercises (TTXs) have also occurred regularly in past, though these events lacked both scale and scope. Such trilateral activities provide a starting point for growing a strong trilateral alliance, and revitalizing these should be among the first steps taken. Rather than meeting only during the Shangri-La Dialogues, for instance, defense and foreign ministers should begin to hold a separate trilateral meeting, or 2+2+2. This meeting poses logistical challenges, but the potential gains from the event could be worth the effort, since a 2+2+2 construct institutionalizes cooperation by both ensuring diplomatic and security agendas progress simultaneously and by establishing a scheduled time to tackle the complex issues facing the three countries. Sideline meetings at multinational events would help further the progress made during 2+2+2 dialogues but cannot serve as a replacement considering the myriad additional items on the agenda at these multilateral gathering. The current DTT should also be bolstered for the same reason. More important than simply institutionalizing dialogue, however, will be producing meaningful action in these meetings. The end goal should be to have near seamless interoperability, frequent trilateral exercises with dynamic scenarios, and even joint operations. Achieving this will take firm U.S. leadership (though not necessarily publicly) and a commitment to completing the processes over many years or even administrations.

Robust trilateral interaction at the leadership level is one key to bolstering the relationship, but a number of other steps must also happen in the near-term to build toward a true trilateral

alliance. Reestablished TTXs and trilateral exercises should be complex events that address the critical challenges facing Northeast Asia. Previous exercises revolved around familiarization and technical training, whereas robust exercises based on realistic scenarios would highlight the need for cooperation among all three nations and actually prepare for potential incidents in the region. It is particularly important for Korean officials to realize the importance of Japanese support to success of U.S.-ROK operations given the historical resistance of ROK leaders to Japanese involvement in planning and training. U.S. government officials should stress this reality whenever they meet with their Korean counterparts—continually highlighting the need for Japanese logistical support, at a minimum, for the success of any contingency on the Peninsula. Simply put, Japanese involvement in security matters is essential to ROK national interests, and the United States should focus on trilateralism's benefit to Korea rather than merely explaining to Seoul why it is good for Washington. The Japanese, meanwhile, would significantly benefit from scenarios that allow them to practice their new capabilities under collective self-defense. Therefore, leaders in the United States should constantly encourage expanding existing exercises into more meaningful trilateral training opportunities.

Fortunately, North Korea's recent aggression has provided ample areas for security cooperation moving forward. Maritime security offers the easiest starting point for serious trilateral efforts. Japan and South Korea worry greatly about anti-submarine warfare (ASW) in light of the North's sizeable submarine and mini-sub fleet and its ongoing efforts to develop a submarine launched ballistic missile. The United States already has advanced ASW capabilities that would be beneficial for both allies. Maritime security exercises could also involve joint minesweeping operations, a widely discussed component of Japanese collective self-defense and a significant ROK need in the event of conflict with the North. Given that Seoul and Tokyo both monitor vast territorial waters, maritime intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) would also be a valuable trilateral training target.

Missile defense presents another important

area of mutual interest given Pyongyang's large arsenal that contains weapons capable of hitting Korea, Japan, and U.S. territory. Each military already possesses strong capabilities to counter hostile missiles, but combining detection, tracking, and engagement capabilities creates a far stronger defense. Trilateral missile defense exercises could be easily and realistically planned and executed. Unlike maritime security, however, true integration of efforts requires additional commitment from Japan and Korea. Having compatible, if not identical, systems is important to effective and efficient missile defense coordination, and Japanese and Korean acquisition of U.S. systems such as AEGIS, AEGIS Ashore, and THAAD would be a middle-term goal of to further strengthen the alliance.

Effective multilateral operations also require the ability to share information with partners. Currently South Korea and Japan lack a mechanism to directly share intelligence after the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) failed to win Korean approval in 2012. The two countries rely on a memorandum of understanding that allows them to share specific information regarding North Korean missile activity through the United States, with whom they both have bilateral information sharing agreements. That arrangement only covers about half the necessary information and creates significant lag in the information flow, according to defense officials. Despite potential opposition, the Abe and Park governments should move to reopen negotiations on GSOMIA as quickly as possible to allow for smooth trilateral coordination not just on missile defense but on all command and control issues. Only rapid action on the issue will capitalize on the current cooperative environment created by Pyongyang's provocations, and without trust and urgency, the second attempt for GSOMIA will end much like the first.

Cooperation on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) capabilities would be the least likely security matter to face significant opposition. Japan and Korea sit in a highly active area of the world, where earthquakes, floods, typhoons, and other natural disasters are common, and both countries have seen their share of devastation from such events.

ROK and Japanese forces have also been quick to respond when other regional countries have suffered. HA/DR operations are fast-paced and work best when leveraging the strengths of various participants. Trilateral exercises would expand capabilities and identify deficiencies in equipment, communications, and training, and joint disaster relief exercises could easily grow into a joint task force, a logical transition into trilateral operations. Additionally, HA/DR missions serve as valuable diplomatic tools for building goodwill and friendship between nations.

### CONCLUSION

The success of U.S. efforts to develop a strong trilateral security alliance with Japan and South Korea ultimately depends on a few key elements:

- The United States must act quickly and decisively to capitalize on the unique environment created by improved bilateral relations between Seoul and Tokyo and North Korean provocations.
- Trilateral cooperation should be institutionalized through regular 2+2+2 meetings and joint exercises in order to separate the politicalized historical issues from national security.
- The United States should encourage and facilitate a new round of GSOMIA discussions so that joint planning, training, and execution are possible with all three countries.
- Trilateral exercises and TTXs should be scenario driven to address specific threats and build capability and interoperability, and these efforts should begin with areas of mutual interest that help counter North Korean aggression.

Developing trilateral capabilities in these areas would be the first steps in building a strong trilateral security alliance in Northeast Asia. They represent concrete methods to improve regional

stability by countering North Korean aggression and protecting the people of Japan and South Korea. These efforts would also institutionalize defense cooperation between the United States, Korea, and Japan, creating regular defense engagements that are separate from the volatile historical issues. By doing so, the United States will make significant strides in its rebalancing efforts and in securing its position in the Asian Century.

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