

POLICY ANALYSIS

# Does the United States Need a New East Asian Anchor? The Case for U.S.-Japan-Korea Trilateralism

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This article evaluates the value of U.S.-Japan-Korea (UJK) trilateralism as an anchor of Asian regional architecture by examining the history of trilateral partnerships, alternative regional groupings, and geopolitical and domestic circumstances.

### MAIN ARGUMENT

The trilateral partnership among the U.S., Japan, and Korea has significantly contributed to the peace and security of East Asia over the last 50 years. This article argues that with additional improvements UJK trilateralism can serve as an anchor for a cooperative framework for regional security in Asia. New leadership in all three countries provides an opportunity to review existing policies and develop long-term strategies for regional architecture. UJK trilateralism compares favorably with alternative regional groupings such as Japan-China-Korea or U.S.-Japan-India. A well-crafted UJK trilateral partnership therefore has the potential to serve as an example-setting cooperative mechanism in the region.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- An enhanced UJK partnership, based on the traditional bilateral U.S.-Japan and U.S.-Korea alliances, can effectively coordinate addressing regional security contingencies.
- A trilateral UJK partnership can contribute to the resolution of the North Korea issue by reviving the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) and integrating it into the existing six-party talks.
- The current economic and financial setbacks should not deter the UJK countries from setting up a bold and creative economic partnership that looks forward to an emerging “Pacific century.”
- The UJK trilateral partnership can go beyond traditional security issues and meaningfully engage broader issues of development, democratic governance, and human rights.

“I believe this tripartite cooperation will endure into the future, and be applied to other problems in the region, as well.”

— William Perry, testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Washington, D.C., October 12, 1999

**D**oes the United States need a new anchor in Asia? Can the U.S.-Japan-Korea (UJK) trilateral partnership be a viable option for a new regional architecture? The policy implications of this research question are clear and all the more urgent considering that all three countries have recently experienced a change in leadership; new administrations are charting new foreign policies to achieve stability and development in the region. This article argues that improved UJK trilateralism can serve as an anchor for a cooperative framework for regional security in Asia.

Trilateralism among the United States, Japan, and Korea has significantly contributed to peace and security in East Asia over the last 50 years. The most important links in the UJK triangle are the United States’ bilateral alliances with Japan and South Korea. Genuine trilateralism, however, has been important in issue areas such as policy coordination regarding North Korea. Building on this success, the United States, Japan, and Korea are now looking to improve their trilateral cooperative mechanisms.

The benefits of trilateralism seem obvious. As traditional allies, the three states are natural partners for promoting peace and security in East Asia. They also share core values of democracy and freedom, making them indispensable pillars of an open East Asian region. Nor does there seem to be a clearly better alternative to UJK trilateralism. To the extent that East Asian community-building requires a subregional anchor, it is hard to think of a better anchor than the U.S.-Japan-Korea triad. It is, therefore, important to review the concept and history of trilateralism among the three states and to explore ways to expand and deepen this partnership as a positive force both in the building of an open and peaceful East Asian region and, more broadly, in constructing a durable Asian regional architecture for stability and development.

The future success of UJK trilateralism is not assured. First, both the U.S.-ROK (Republic of Korea) alliance and the U.S.-Japan alliance have shown signs of strain in recent years. Second, the three countries have not been successful in articulating a new rationale for trilateralism in the presence of competing ideas. While highlighting the potential benefits of trilateralism, this article also recognizes the potential obstacles that may hinder the development of trilateral relations in light of recent political and economic developments. The economic downturn may result in less

attention being paid to Northeast Asia, as this region's place on leaders' policy agendas is eclipsed by other policy priorities at home and abroad. The financial crunch may also lead to cuts in defense spending and thus less money for alliance relations. Economic hardship most obviously and directly affects economic relations, pulling political attention away from multilateral cooperation. The mounting domestic opposition to the Korea–U.S. free trade agreement (KORUS FTA), both in the U.S. Congress and in the Korean National Assembly, is just one instance of a protectionist backlash that is undermining cooperation.

Given domestic leadership changes and fluid regional security dynamics, now is an opportune moment to evaluate the potential benefits of trilateral cooperation and to consider what those changes portend for trilateral relations. In examining UJK trilateralism, the article is divided into five sections:

- ≈ pp. 70–72 describe the characteristics of trilateralism as a cooperative grouping
- ≈ pp. 72–78 review the historical pathways of UJK trilateral relations
- ≈ pp. 78–86 consider alternative regional groupings as potential candidates to serve as an anchor of cooperative framework and establish the argument that UJK trilateralism is a politically feasible and desirable option
- ≈ pp. 86–91 examine the conditions necessary for successful implementation of trilateralism and specifically consider domestic political conditions as well as geopolitical circumstances
- ≈ pp. 92–99 offer a set of policy recommendations that the United States, Japan, and Korea together can pursue and consider four policy issue domains: alliance policies, the problem of North Korea, the future of trilateral economic cooperation, and the possibility of broader cooperation on human rights issues

#### THE CONCEPT OF UJK TRILATERALISM

Before developing concrete policy proposals and strategies based on trilateralism, it will be helpful to describe trilateralism's form and substance. This section first considers a general definition of trilateralism, with attention to key characteristics and requirements. It then derives a typology of trilateral relations. The discussion is primarily informed by the history of trilateralism and consideration of contemporary patterns of trilateralism in practice.

Trilateralism refers to “cooperative security behavior between three states or strategic polities to promote specific values and orders.”<sup>1</sup> This definition focuses on three elements: the nature of the arrangement, the parties involved, and the goal of the arrangement. First, with regard to the nature of the interaction, trilateralism is defined as cooperative behavior. It is behavior that can be developed into institutionalized cooperative forms or practices. Although such cooperation has historically been confined to the issue of security, trilateralism can be extended to other domains, such as economic development or the environment, due to the close policy nexus among issue areas.

Second, in terms of the actors involved, trilateralism is a forum for policy among three states or other strategic polities. This implies that trilateral relations are more than the sum of bilateral relations between the countries that are willing to cooperate. It also means that major actors share some predisposition to be strategic allies equipped with political will and capabilities.

The third element of the definition—common political goals and a shared strategic vision of regional or international order—establishes the necessary conditions for trilateral relations. The creation of trilateral relations requires the alignment of foreign policy interests, be they common threats or the establishment of regional or international order. The progenitor of modern trilateralism, the Trilateral Commission, is a case in point. This grouping was formed by private citizens of the United States, Japan, and Europe who shared the goal of together shouldering leadership responsibilities in the international system. The trilateral relations among the United States, Japan, and South Korea fit the proposed definition. These three states have a history of coordination in security affairs, are strategic allies with bilateral military alliances, and share common interests in peace and security in the region.

If we consider any and all forms of interaction and exchange that take place between countries, then trilateral relations can be found to exist among just about any randomly selected set of three countries. Therefore, it is important to confine analysis of trilateralism to formal trilateral relations, i.e., to cooperative behavior under formal bilateral or trilateral agreements.

There are two main variables affecting forms of institutionalized trilateral relations: (1) the strength or circularity of bilateral relationships along the trilateral axis and (2) the choice of a multilateral forum as the primary political venue used to foster trilateral relations. Countries pursuing trilateralism first choose whether to use a hub-and-spoke system or a three-way mechanism.

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<sup>1</sup> William Tow, Mark Thomson, and Yoshinobu Yamamoto, eds., *Asia-Pacific Security: US, Australia and Japan and the New Security Triangle* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2007), 24.