

# THE CASE FOR U.S.-ROK-JAPAN TRILATERALISM

*Strengths and Limitations*

By Roy D. Kamphausen, John S. Park, Ryo Sahashi, and Alison Szalwinski





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NBR SPECIAL REPORT #70 | FEBRUARY 2018

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Front cover image: Tomoe - Archaic Japanese abstract shape © Alberto Bizzini / istock.com.

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## — FOREWORD —

In early 2016, the trilateral relationship between the United States, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (ROK) seemed to be reaching a golden period of cooperation as progress on sensitive issues such as missile defense, information sharing, and historical disputes offered room for cautious optimism. Against this backdrop, the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) saw a need for further analysis and discussion of the historical roots of the trilateral relationship, followed by engagement with stakeholders from all three nations in identifying opportunities for cooperation.

In the first phase of the project, NBR sought to explore the key issues of the trilateral relationship, beginning with an examination of the fraught history of relations since World War II, and then to identify areas for future analysis. NBR brought together three experts from the United States, South Korea, and Japan—Daniel Sneider (Stanford University), Yul Sohn (Yonsei University), and Yoshihide Soeya (Keio University)—to discuss realistic but innovative ways to think about trilateral relations. These experts authored essays that were published in July 2016 in the NBR Special Report “U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateralism: Building Bridges and Strengthening Cooperation.”

Sneider’s essay provided an analysis of the trilateral relationship from a U.S. perspective. He acknowledged the positive developments in the ROK-Japan relationship but cautioned, presciently, that the two countries had only taken a tentative first step toward engaging in truly robust cooperation. His essay detailed the history of progress in their bilateral relationship, which often required the United States to play a mediating role behind the scenes. Sneider also stressed that the United States needs to attend to the trilateral relationship carefully by strengthening strategic cooperation while solidifying progress made on resolving wartime history disputes.

The essay by Sohn offered a South Korean perspective and underlined the strategic challenge that South Korea faces in improving U.S.-ROK-Japan cooperation while also expanding ties with China. Sohn noted that North Korea’s nuclear program has provided the primary impetus for trilateral cooperation but has not been enough to overcome the mistrust between South Korea and Japan over history issues. He called for South Korea to play a middle-power role, bridging the Chinese and U.S.-ROK-Japan networks to achieve a stable outcome on the Korean Peninsula.

The essay authored by Soeya emphasized that Japan and South Korea share many national interests and must carefully navigate the strategic disputes between the United States and China. He reviewed the then newly introduced Japanese security legislation and assessed the implications for the trilateral relationship in the context of Japan’s historical role in the region. Soeya concluded by arguing that Japan and the ROK both have a vested interest in improving middle-power cooperation in the face of increasing Sino-U.S. tension.

Building on the findings of this first phase of the project, phase two formed a trilateral commission of experts who met in a series of workshops in Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington, D.C., to develop a holistic view of the dynamics of the trilateral relationship. This phase commenced at pivotal moments in both U.S. and South Korean domestic politics, amid the transition to a new presidential administration in the United States and public demonstrations in South Korea

that led to the removal of President Park Geun-hye from office. Both developments merited close monitoring for impact on the trilateral relationship.

In November 2016 the project co-chairs—Roy Kamphausen (NBR), John Park (Harvard University), and Ryo Sahashi (Japan Center for International Exchange)—convened a day-long workshop in Washington, D.C., which featured presentations by experts from all three countries. Panels on regional security threats, nontraditional security challenges, energy security, and emerging domains laid the groundwork for phase two of the project and set the tone for subsequent meetings in the region. Despite the uncertainty posed by new domestic political developments in the United States and the ROK, participants generally believed that prospects for trilateral cooperation continued to show promise. A common theme echoed during all four panels was that trilateral cooperation is a necessary and effective approach to address many of the traditional and nontraditional challenges both within and outside Asia.

Nevertheless, one obstacle to deepening such cooperation is the fact that Japan and the ROK still lack the strategic trust that is needed to move forward with security cooperation. As a result, trilateral cooperation lags behind bilateral cooperation—both between Japan and the United States and between the ROK and the United States—in areas such as nuclear deterrence, energy security, and cybersecurity. Some participants suggested that Japan and South Korea could expand their cooperation in less politically sensitive areas such as antipiracy in order to build trust and understanding that could later be applied to more divisive security issues.

In March 2017 the three co-chairs led a pair of workshops in Seoul and Tokyo to further discuss these themes and consider the implications for the region. While the trilateral relationship has been promoted for decades, in the months following the D.C. workshop North Korea's missile and nuclear weapons activities imbued it with a new sense of urgency and purpose. Panels of U.S., ROK, and Japanese experts at the workshops in Seoul and Tokyo noted that the uncertainties in the political environments in the United States and South Korea would reduce the chances of leveraging the momentum from strong Japanese interest in trilateral relations. However, participants concluded that it is likely that the three countries will continue to build on existing operational trust, even while bilateral strategic trust between Japan and the ROK remains low.

The findings from these three workshops, additional meetings in the region, and research by the project team form the basis for this final report. The report situates the U.S.-ROK-Japan relationship in the context of the scholarly literature on trilateralism and draws comparisons with several case studies. It then examines the four themes that structured phase two of the project—regional security, nontraditional security, energy security, and security in emerging domains—and offers concrete recommendations for how the United States, South Korea, and Japan can improve cooperation in each area. It is evident that the threat from North Korea will be a critical and continually pressing issue for the three partners in the years to come. While historically this shared threat has brought the countries into closer cooperation, North Korea is increasingly demanding their full attention. The United States, the ROK, and Japan must work to ensure that the issue does not become a wedge driven between them, hindering critical policy cooperation over their shared security threats in addition to the positive trajectory of the overall trilateral relationship, which serves as a foundation for stability and prosperity in the region.

## The Case for U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateralism: Strengths and Limitations

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**NOTE:** The authors wish to thank Claire Chaeryung Lee and Melanie Berry for their invaluable assistance in researching and drafting this report. This report was made possible by the generous support of the Korea Foundation, the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission, and the Center for Global Partnership.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report situates the U.S.-ROK-Japan relationship in the context of the scholarly literature on trilateralism and offers concrete recommendations for strengthening trilateral cooperation in four key areas: regional security, nontraditional security, energy security, and the emerging domains of space and cybersecurity.

### MAIN ARGUMENT

Trilateral cooperation between the U.S., the ROK, and Japan is a necessary and effective approach to address many of the traditional and nontraditional challenges both within and outside Asia. Trilateral initiatives are most successful when they are based on countering shared threats and promoting concrete, common interests, rather than being carried out just for the sake of the three countries doing something together. Rooted in such shared interests and values, the U.S.-ROK-Japan relationship has made significantly more concrete, substantive progress than other trilaterals in recent decades. However, as security challenges in East Asia grow increasingly acute, a more concerted trilateral approach from the U.S., South Korea, and Japan is needed. In early 2016, the relationship appeared to be entering a golden period of cooperation, as progress on sensitive issues such as missile defense, information sharing, and historical disputes offered room for cautious optimism. But momentum has notably slowed over the last year. On the one hand, coordination between Japan and the ROK has not been smooth due to a lack of strategic trust. On the other hand, there are ongoing concerns about the U.S. commitment to the region. The three nations must work together to address the lingering tensions and concerns that inhibit greater trilateral cooperation and emphasize that such cooperation is necessary to protect each country's citizens and preserve a rules-based order in Asia.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- The U.S., the ROK, and Japan should prioritize military coordination, especially trilateral military exercises, to strengthen security vis-à-vis North Korea.
- Cooperation on addressing nontraditional security challenges provides an opportunity to build strategic trust. In particular, the three countries should participate in combined HADR and peacekeeping activities, explore ways to improve regional energy security, and collaborate on addressing security threats in the cyber and space domains.
- U.S., ROK, and Japanese leaders should publicly emphasize the importance of trilateral security cooperation to gain popular approval within each nation and promote broader Asian regionalism and democratic values.



As North Korea's nuclear and missile developments increasingly dominate foreign policy discussions in Washington, and tensions in the region continue to rise, a strong, closely coordinated trilateral relationship between the United States, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and Japan is needed now more than ever. Some positive signs have emerged at the beginning of 2018. On January 17, in a trilateral meeting on the sidelines of the Foreign Ministers' Meeting on Security and Stability on the Korean Peninsula held in Vancouver, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha, and Foreign Minister Taro Kono re-emphasized the shared goal of peacefully resolving the issue of North Korea's nuclear development, as well as the need for close trilateral coordination, and expressed the view that the ongoing inter-Korean dialogue is "timely."<sup>1</sup> After reports that he would not attend the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe joined the opening ceremony, where he met with President Moon Jae-in and Vice President Mike Pence. Abe strongly asserted that "North Korea must recognize that the strong ties between Japan, the United States, and South Korea will never waver."<sup>2</sup>

This progress comes amid lowered expectations for the momentum of the trilateral partnership. Daylight has dangerously emerged between the Trump and Moon administrations' policies toward North Korea, as the stated shared policy of "maximum pressure and engagement" has primarily become one of maximum pressure on the U.S. side and engagement with some pressure on the ROK side. In the other leg of the triangle, the progressive government in the ROK has recently renewed the debate on a 2015 bilateral agreement with Japan over the Korean women forced to work in Japanese military brothels during the Japanese occupation in World War II, raising domestic tensions in both nations. Although the issue of burden sharing, which Trump focused on during his campaign, has taken a backseat to the North Korea threat, it is likely to re-emerge later in 2018, when the United States and the ROK must negotiate a new agreement on sharing defense costs, and continue into 2019, when negotiations between the United States and Japan on host-nation support are due to begin.

The potential for greater distance to develop in each leg of the U.S.-ROK-Japan relationship will only be mitigated by careful analysis of these challenges, identification of the strengths and opportunities of the trilateral relationship, and close coordination between the partners centered on the idea that each country can best serve its national interests by strengthening trilateral relations rather than undermining them. This report contributes to this goal by bridging academic analysis and real-world policy discussions on trilateralism.

The first section explores the existing literature and thinking on trilateralism as a concept. What roles do scholars see trilateral relationships playing in international relations, and what is their application in the context of Asia? The discussion of these questions examines the benefits and positive contributions of trilateral relationships, as well as the impediments to making trilateralism a useful construction to achieve concrete results. The report then assesses several comparative cases of relatively formal trilateral partnerships. Against this backdrop, it becomes clear that the U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral is unique in purpose and accomplishments, if not in tension and challenges. Finally, the report analyzes the four key themes that have structured the

<sup>1</sup> "S. Korea, U.S., Japan Reaffirm Shared Goal of Peacefully Resolving NK Nuke Problem," Yonhap, January 17, 2018, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/search1/2603000000.html?cid=AEN20180117010200315>.

<sup>2</sup> "Abe, Moon Agree to Maintain Pressure on N Korea," *Japan Today*, February 9, 2018, <https://japantoday.com/category/politics/Abe-begins-talks-with-Moon-ahead-of-Olympic-opening-ceremony>.

project—regional security threats, nontraditional security challenges, energy security, and the emerging domains of space and cybersecurity—and offers recommendations in each area.

## Trilateralism as Regional Architecture

In international relations, a trilateral relationship involves three entities that share “common political goals and a strategic vision of regional or international order.”<sup>3</sup> It is therefore not limited to a formal alliance between states, nor are its goals purely dedicated to missions in the traditional security arena. Additionally, the unique configuration of a trilateral grouping, situated between bilateral relationships and broader multi-partner arrangements, makes it the most minimal form of multilateralism (i.e., minilateralism). Especially in a region marked by the absence of overarching regional security architectures, ad hoc mission-driven trilateral cooperation has long played a tangible role in international diplomacy. For instance, as soon as North Korea made public its intention to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1993, the United States, the ROK, and Japan acted swiftly, calling meetings between the three nations in New York. Among other measures, they chose trilateralism as a viable mechanism to manage the North Korean nuclear crisis and institutionalized this process in the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) in 1999.<sup>4</sup>

Despite its special place in Asian regionalism, however, trilateralism has not garnered the same level of scholarly and public attention afforded to other types of regional groupings. Some scholars have declared that Asian regionalism is idiosyncratic, being largely defined by an apparent absence of formal regional security institutions.<sup>5</sup> The underutilization of multilateral organizations in Asia stands in contrast with the European experience, in which nations scrambled to build strong and functional regional organizations such as NATO and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.<sup>6</sup> Experts have attributed the lack of such an organization in Asia to, among other causes, the persistent influence of colonialism, heterogeneity in national identities and political systems, and the unique role that the United States plays through what is known as a hub-and-spoke alliance system.

However, as regional institutions such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other multilateral groupings began to form in the 1960s, some alternative perspectives emerged. This line of research largely rejected the premise of the arguments laid out by earlier works and emphasized how regional institutions operate differently in Asia and help form a unique regional identity.<sup>7</sup> Over many years, this scholarship has yielded outstanding work that contributes greatly to our understanding of Asian regionalism. Nevertheless, the majority of studies still focus on traditional arrangements of regional architecture, namely bilateral security

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<sup>3</sup> Hyeran Jo and Jongryn Mo, “Does the United States Need a New East Asian Anchor? The Case for U.S.-Japan-Korea Trilateralism,” *Asia Policy*, no. 9 (2010): 71; and William T. Tow, Mark J. Thomson, Yoshinobu Yamamoto, and Satu P. Limaye, eds., *Asia-Pacific Security: U.S., Australia and Japan and the New Security Triangle* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 24.

<sup>4</sup> James Schoff, “First Interim Report: The Evolution of the TCOG as a Diplomatic Tool,” Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, November 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Kent E. Calder and Francis Fukuyama, eds., *East Asian Multilateralism: Prospects for Regional Stability* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Aaron L. Friedberg, “Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia,” *International Security* 18, no. 3 (1993/94): 12–13, 22–23.

<sup>7</sup> Victor D. Cha, “American Alliances and Asia’s Regional Architecture,” in *Oxford Handbook of the International Relations of Asia*, ed. Saadia M. Pekkanen, John Ravenhill, and Rosemary Foot (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 737–57; Andrew Yeo, “Bilateralism, Multilateralism, and Institutional Change in Northeast Asia’s Regional Security Architecture,” East Asia Institute, Working Paper, no. 30, April 2011; and Van Jackson, “Power, Trust, and Network Complexity: Three Logics of Hedging in Asian Security,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 14, no. 3 (2014): 331–56.

alliances and multilateralism. Few studies dedicate their undivided attention to exploring the subject of trilateral cooperation as a means of regionalism, the purpose of which expands beyond traditional security issues.<sup>8</sup>

In recent years, Asia has experienced a proliferation of trilateral groupings. Besides the TCOG, a few examples include the U.S.-Japan-ROK Defense Ministers Meeting, the U.S.-Japan-Australia Trilateral Security Dialogue, the U.S.-Japan-India trilateral, and the China-Japan-Korea trilateral. As these examples reveal, trilateralism, which does not fit into the framework of either a bilateral alliance or a traditional multilateral arrangement, has increasingly been pursued in Asia as an alternative mechanism of interstate cooperation.

### *The Benefits of Trilateralism*

The growing significance of trilateral cooperation raises the question of why political actors in Asia increasingly choose trilateralism as an avenue for cooperation. Are there distinctive strategic benefits that the participating parties derive from trilateral cooperation versus bilateral or multilateral arrangements?

Some scholars emphasize the intrinsic value of the trilateral relationship as a legitimate form of regional cooperation that bestows benefits to all participating parties. According to this view, trilateralism is the most minimized form of multilateral grouping and therefore inherits some of the basic advantages of traditional multilateralism while avoiding its most serious problems. Muhui Zhang argues that “due to the relatively small number of total cooperative partners, minilateralism is widely known for its efficiency, given that complications and transaction costs are expected to be proportional to the number of actors involved in any multilateral arrangement.”<sup>9</sup> It is not uncommon for high bureaucratic burdens and administrative costs to stall multilateral cooperation among member states with vastly divergent interests.

Trilateralism also offers many of the same benefits as traditional multilateral cooperation. In the first place, it ensures a stable and effective flow of communication by institutionalizing points of contact for the partners. Trilateral cooperation also facilitates long-term policy planning and fosters institution building among the involved nations. In this process, the parties can reap the benefits of shared norms and closer coordination in broad issue areas.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, trilateral relationships can also be portrayed as a purely strategic move in power politics.<sup>11</sup> This line of thinking pays special attention to the pronounced role of the United States as a hegemonic leader in Asia after the end of World War II as the basis of trilateral cooperation. The United States’ special position and interests prompted the country to establish bilateral alliances to further its own strategic goals.<sup>12</sup> According to this view, trilateral groupings in Asia represent an extension of embedded bilateral alliances to form regional blocs as a part of the U.S. security balancing act.<sup>13</sup> Understood as such, trilateralism works less as a “truly mature form of minilateral or multilateral arrangement.”<sup>14</sup> Trilateral cooperation is no more than the

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<sup>8</sup> For a noteworthy exception, see Michael J. Green, “Strategic Asian Triangles,” in Pekkanen et al., *Oxford Handbook*, 758.

<sup>9</sup> Muhui Zhang, “Proceeding in Hardship: The Trilateralism-Bilateralism Nexus and the Institutional Evolution of China-Japan-South Korea Trilateralism,” *Pacific Review* 31, no. 1 (2018): 3.

<sup>10</sup> Schoff, “First Interim Report,” 2.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Stephen Gill, “Hegemony, Consensus, and Trilateralism,” *Review of International Studies* 12, no. 3 (1986): 205–22.

<sup>12</sup> Victor D. Cha, “Complex Patchworks: U.S. Alliances as Part of Asia’s Regional Architecture,” *Asia Policy*, no. 11 (2011): 27–50.

<sup>13</sup> Green, “Strategic Asian Triangles,” 763–64.

<sup>14</sup> Zhang, “Proceeding in Hardship,” 3.

sum of the separate, two-way alliances, rather than producing a full-fledged trilateral institution in which three-way cooperation creates a greater whole. This arrangement enables the United States to extend the benefits of preexisting bilateral partnerships and maximize its own strategic position. U.S.-led trilateralism more effectively ensures the credibility of the United States' commitments to its allies and partners and strengthens extended deterrence based on better coordination and combined resources. In addition, trilateral relations can safeguard traditional alliances and partnerships against other regional challengers attempting to undermine them.

### *Impediments to Successful Trilateralism*

Despite these potential benefits of trilateral cooperation, several constraining factors work against successful implementation of trilateralism. Among the most potent issues, particularly in the U.S.-ROK-Japan case, are geopolitical concerns over the rationale for the trilateral relationship. Such concerns include international constraints that change the internal calculus of participating nations. For instance, a security dilemma ensuing from the formation of a trilateral partnership can arise when “a state tries to increase its security” but “decrease[s] the security of others.” Victor Cha explains this dynamic in Asia by noting that many regional efforts initiated by a U.S. alliance are “seen as latent efforts to contain China.” And conversely, many efforts initiated by China are “seen as attempts to exclude the United States.”<sup>15</sup> Under these circumstances, the formation of a trilateral partnership involving certain actors risks creating a security dilemma. This dynamic can, in turn, limit the scale and scope of the activities that can be undertaken by a trilateral arrangement.

Another issue related to trilateralism is the degenerative effect of schisms between dyads within a trilateral arrangement. Since trilateral partnerships theoretically build three-way cooperation, a dysfunctional bilateral relationship within the trilateral grouping can dampen the potential benefits of coordination. On this point, Zhang noted that “the periodic ups and downs caused by political discord have repeatedly posed serious challenges to the stability and sustainability of the trilateral relationship.”<sup>16</sup> For example, deep-seated historical disputes between South Korea and Japan have limited the extent of their cooperation within a trilateral framework.

Under the stress of such bilateral constraints, member states will likely experience “dilution effects” in which “the payoffs of a trilateral regime may not be always higher than the sum payoffs of two bilateral dyads.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, the persisting friction within a trilateral grouping could have paralyzing effects on stable communication and cooperation and thereby significantly increase the cost of three-way coordination. Under these circumstances, the incentives for a member state to defect from the trilateral grouping to form two separate bilateral relationships may well increase in proportion to the intensity of the internal feud within a triad. This, in turn, will eventually bring a trilateral partnership to an end.

### *Why Should Trilateral Cooperation Occur?*

The preceding review of existing literature on the impetus for and pitfalls of trilateral arrangements underlines a broader question that is often overlooked when states become invested in a trilateral relationship: what activities are best served through a trilateral mechanism? It can

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<sup>15</sup> Cha, “Complex Patchworks,” 28.

<sup>16</sup> Zhang, “Proceeding in Hardship,” 2.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.



become tempting, particularly when proponents of a trilateral partnership that faces inherent tensions and constraints need to advocate for the arrangement, to press for utilizing the trilateral configuration in its broadest possible application. Under such pressure, any issue is recommended as an opportunity for the three parties to cooperate trilaterally. However, it is important that trilateralism not be employed merely for its own sake. Doing so can diminish the importance and impact of truly critical drivers of trilateral cooperation, such as major security threats; distract from the greater purpose behind the relationship; and siphon off resources and attention for minor benefits.

As noted, states seek to engage in trilateral relationships when doing so increases the benefits beyond what could be accomplished unilaterally, bilaterally, or multilaterally. This requires that they share interests in one of three categories: security, economics, and values and norms. While these interests can overlap and usually exist in parallel, the impetus for trilateral cooperation can usually be traced back to one of these driving forces, with security threats being the most unifying and motivating factor.

When a shared security threat confronts a given set of three nations, they are compelled to cooperate trilaterally when doing so is necessary to address the challenge. Trilateral activities that serve to directly mitigate a threat, prepare for contingencies, and increase the security of all three nations can achieve results that would be difficult or costly if any one nation undertook them on its own or with only one partner. As a second-order motivation for cooperation, if two of the states that share a common threat face bilateral tensions prohibiting them from fully cooperating, the trilateral arrangement can also act as a means to bridge that gap and provide an opportunity for the two to work together when they otherwise would be unable or unwilling to do so. In this case, there are trilateral activities that the states may undertake together that do not directly address the shared security threat but that do help build the relationship and develop patterns of behavior with the goal of engaging in future cooperation on more sensitive and critical issues.

Security is not the only reason that states cooperate and form partnerships, though. Nations that can derive economic benefits from cooperating, because of complementary markets or as a component of building greater multilateral or regional cooperation, can do so under a trilateral arrangement. In addition, three nations that share values and norms can strengthen and further develop them in the international community by cooperating on nontraditional security issues within a trilateral framework.

These motivating factors for and benefits derived from trilateral cooperation should be kept in mind when considering how to advance trilateral relationships. Activities that take place merely to check the box of having done something in a trilateral configuration, and which do not advance the shared interests of the three states in a way that they could not have achieved through less complex (i.e., unilateral or bilateral) methods, undermine the efficacy of the trilateral configuration.

## Comparative Cases of Trilateralism

While this report focuses specifically on the U.S.-ROK-Japan relationship, the drivers, progress, and limitations of other trilateral relationships bear examination. By looking at six other cases of trilateralism—China-ROK-Japan, Australia-India-Japan, China-Russia-Mongolia, China-Russia-India, China-Russia-Pakistan, and India-Brazil-South Africa—the deep history and unique accomplishments of the U.S.-ROK-Japan relationship stand out. While some

trilaterals have formed because of a stated goal to increase economic cooperation, others have coalesced around a shared desire to strategically balance against other states in the region, each with varying degrees of success.

### *China-ROK-Japan*

Stand-alone, high-level summits between China, South Korea, and Japan have been held on a nominally annual basis since 2008, expanding from trilateral breakfast meetings during the ASEAN +3 summit. Rather than considering wider strategic matters, these summits tend to focus on consensus-inducing functional issues, especially as they relate to increasing regional economic interdependence. The most recent trilateral leaders' summit, held in Seoul in November 2015, produced joint declarations on efforts to improve regional dialogue and cooperation on stability on the Korean Peninsula, disaster management, trade and investment, sustainable development, public health, and people-to-people exchange.<sup>18</sup>

Nominally, trilateral cooperation centers on these functional issues in order to ensure continuation in the event of political tensions, but in practice it is often undermined by bilateral tensions between South Korea, China, and Japan. Recent examples include China's dispute with South Korea over Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) and Japan's protests against South Korean civic groups' installation of "comfort women" statues near Japanese consulates, which scuttled the 2016 summit.<sup>19</sup> Certain strategic issues of interest to China, such as the dispute over THAAD, continue to be addressed on a bilateral basis. The Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat, established in Seoul in 2011 and considered one of the few concrete, institutionalized outcomes of trilateral cooperation, continues to have limited influence on policy and cooperation due to a lack of operational and administrative independence from the three governments.<sup>20</sup> Formal talks between the nations over a potential free trade agreement, begun in 2012, have continued even after high-level trilateral talks were called off, but they have not yet produced any concrete results.<sup>21</sup> Overall, while South Korea, China, and Japan have cooperated on a trilateral basis since 2008, this has not significantly altered relationship dynamics or produced an effective dispute-resolution mechanism.

It is useful to compare how Japan and South Korea interact with China in a trilateral context with their trilateral relationship with the United States. Despite a nominal emphasis on focusing on practical issues that engender consensus, bilateral tensions have frequently interfered with attempts to institutionalize trilateralism. Furthermore, tensions between South Korea and Japan are often amplified by China's similar historical animosities toward Japan and by China's tendency to condition progress in China-ROK-Japan cooperation on the current level of those animosities. In comparison, the United States' willingness to push for historical reconciliation between South Korea and Japan seems to have achieved some success with the bilateral agreement on "comfort

<sup>18</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), "The Sixth Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit," November 2, 2015, [http://www.mofa.go.jp/a\\_o/rp/page3e\\_000409.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page3e_000409.html).

<sup>19</sup> "Japan-South Korea Statue Row Delays Summit with China," *Nikkei Asian Review*, January 31, 2017, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/International-Relations/Japan-South-Korea-statue-row-delays-summit-with-China>; and Catherine Wong, "Japan 'Pushes for Summit' with China and South Korea This Year," *South China Morning Post*, November 2, 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2118183/japan-pushes-summit-china-and-south-korea-year>.

<sup>20</sup> Muhui Zhang, "Institutional Creation or Sovereign Extension? Roles and Functions of Nascent China-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* (2017): 25–26, <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcw023>.

<sup>21</sup> Chris Buckley and Terri Yue Jones, "East Asian Powers Set to Push Trade Pact Talks," Reuters, May 12, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-summit/east-asian-powers-set-to-push-trade-pact-talks-idUSBRE84C00V20120513>.

women” in December 2015 and the signing of the General Security of Military Information Agreement the next year. Drawing lessons from the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat is also useful. Its limitations suggest that if the United States, South Korea, and Japan were to establish a similar secretariat to oversee their trilateral affairs, it would need some degree of operational and administrative independence from the three governments in order to be effective.

### *Australia-India-Japan*

Australia, India, and Japan have held several meetings and summits as part of their trilateral dialogue, begun in June 2015. The most recent summit—the third Trilateral Dialogue Senior Officials Meeting—was held on April 29, 2017.<sup>22</sup> According to Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the trilateral dialogue is intended to “strengthen these key relationships in addressing issues of common strategic interest in the Indo-Pacific region and through cooperation in areas such as regional connectivity and infrastructure development.”<sup>23</sup> All three nations share a perception of China as a strategic competitor, similar democratic values, and an interest in maintaining freedom of navigation in Southeast Asia for both economic and strategic purposes, as well as close or growing relationships with the United States. However, concrete results beyond dialogue have been limited. A potential trilateral maritime exercise was discussed at the first meeting in 2015 but has not yet been instituted.<sup>24</sup>

This trilateral grew out of an attempt by the three countries and the United States to form another multilateral grouping: the quadrilateral initiative, or “quad,” which fell through in 2008 due to pressure from China. The recent re-emergence of the quad at the East Asia Summit in November 2017 hints at the limitations of the trilateral arrangement. Australia, Japan, and India simply do not have the combined defense capabilities to outweigh China without the involvement of the United States, and their distance and short history of cooperation (in the case of India) limit how effectively they can support each other.<sup>25</sup> While concrete outcomes have so far been elusive, some have suggested that the grouping’s return to the quad format would be the culmination of their trilateral cooperation.<sup>26</sup>

China’s role as an outside influence on the quad’s viability in 2008 can be compared to China’s influence on relations between South Korea, Japan, and the United States now. In the case of the quad, China had stronger economic leverage over Australia and India than over Japan and the United States. Similarly, China has more economic leverage over South Korea than it does over the United States and Japan, and South Korea must balance increasing cooperation with Japan with China’s complaints over such cooperation. The Australia-India-Japan trilateral has not produced any concrete initiatives or institutions, but rather than being limited by historical tensions, it seems to be specifically constrained by a short history of cooperation with India and relatively weak combined defense capabilities. This suggests that the more entrenched relationships between

<sup>22</sup> “Japan-Australia-India Trilateral Dialogue Senior Officials Meeting,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), Press Release, April 28, 2017, [http://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e\\_001567.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_001567.html).

<sup>23</sup> Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia), “Performance Reporting—South and West Asia: India,” in *Annual Report 2014–15* (Canberra, 2015), <http://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/corporate/annual-reports/annual-report-2014-2015/home/section-2/outcome-1/south-and-west-asia/index.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Manu Pubby, “India Kicks Off Trilateral Talks with Japan and Australia; Joint Training, Naval Exercises on Agenda,” *Economic Times*, June 8, 2015, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-kicks-off-trilateral-talks-with-japan-and-australia-joint-training-naval-exercises-on-agenda/articleshow/47579881.cms>.

<sup>25</sup> Rajesh Rajagopalan, “U.S.-India Relations under President Trump: Promise and Peril,” *Asia Policy*, no. 24 (2017): 40.

<sup>26</sup> Harsh V. Pant, “Asia’s New Geopolitics Takes Shape Around India, Japan, and Australia,” *Diplomat*, July 28, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/07/asias-new-geopolitics-takes-shape-around-india-japan-and-australia>.

the United States and South Korea and the United States and Japan could provide a relatively strong basis for cooperation, despite historical tensions.

### *China-Russia-Mongolia*

Trilateral cooperation among China, Russia, and Mongolia focuses on functional economic issues. President Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj of Mongolia signed various trilateral economic partnership agreements with Presidents Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping at a meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in June 2016.<sup>27</sup> These included agreements to jointly develop and improve infrastructure, to establish an economic corridor, and to establish “mutual recognition of customs inspection results with regard to particular categories of goods.”<sup>28</sup> The intent of the economic corridor, in particular, was stated by Elbegdorj as being to “put in place conditions for expanding trilateral cooperation through increasing trade between our three countries.”<sup>29</sup> The presidents also expressed hope that they would cooperate further on other issues like agriculture; disaster prevention, response, and relief; and energy security.<sup>30</sup> China’s suspension of bilateral interactions with Mongolia after a visit by the Dalai Lama in November 2016, as well as the anti-China rhetoric of Khaltmaa Battulga during his presidential campaign, seemed to put the aforementioned trilateral plans on hold.<sup>31</sup> Battulga has moderated his rhetoric toward China since being elected president, and relations seem to be back on a positive track, with the Mongolian foreign minister visiting China in December 2017.<sup>32</sup> While concrete results are possible in the future, it remains to be seen whether trilateral cooperation will be re-established.

China-Russia-Mongolia trilateralism differs greatly from that between the United States, the ROK, and Japan due mainly to its narrow focus on economic cooperation. There is an absence of immediate security concerns that involve Mongolia and its borders with both China and Russia, reducing the motivation to cooperate on security issues. This has freed Mongolia to pursue security cooperation with a wide range of actors, including the United States, without strong backlash from China or Russia. While some historical tensions remain between the three countries, in particular strong anti-China sentiment among some in Mongolia and controversy in China over Mongolia’s relations with the Dalai Lama, this does not seem to have constrained cooperation during the first announcement of trilateral economic partnership agreements in June 2016. This suggests that cooperation on specific, practical goals unrelated to security could pave the way for reviving communication and dialogue in the future if problems emerge.

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<sup>27</sup> Peter Bittner, “China, Russia, Mongolia Sign Long-Awaited Economic Partnership Agreement,” *Diplomat*, June 28, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/china-russia-mongolia-sign-long-awaited-economic-partnership-agreement>.

<sup>28</sup> “The Third Trilateral Meeting between Mongolia, Russia, and China Held,” Office of the President of Mongolia, June 23, 2016, <http://www.president.mn/eng/newsCenter/viewNews.php?newsId=1890>.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Ankit Panda, “China Freezes Bilateral Diplomacy with Mongolia over Dalai Lama Visit,” *Diplomat*, November 27, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/11/china-freezes-bilateral-diplomacy-with-mongolia-over-dalai-lama-visit>; and Sharad K. Soni, “Mongolia’s New President Is Mongolia First and China Last,” *East Asia Forum*, August 11, 2017, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/08/11/mongolias-new-president-is-mongolia-first-and-china-last>.

<sup>32</sup> Charlotte Gao, “After Anti-China Campaign Rhetoric, Mongolia’s President Congratulates China on National Day,” *Diplomat*, October 3, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/10/after-anti-china-campaign-rhetoric-mongolias-president-congratulates-china-on-national-day>; and “Mongolian FM to Visit China,” *Xinhua*, November 27, 2017, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-11/27/c\\_136782877.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-11/27/c_136782877.htm).



## China-Russia-India

Trilateral cooperation among China, Russia, and India was first proposed by Russian premier Yevgeny Primakov in 1998, and annual trilateral meetings began in 2002.<sup>33</sup> These meetings have been held consistently, despite occasional tensions between India and China. A joint communiqué released by the three countries during the fifteenth trilateral meeting between their foreign ministers in December 2017 stated that they viewed the format “as a platform to foster closer dialogue and practical cooperation in identified areas,” and that their trilateral cooperation is “conducive to maintaining international and regional peace, stability and promoting global economic growth and prosperity.” Numerous specific areas of shared interest were identified, including the “establishment of a just and equitable international order based on international law and featuring mutual respect, fairness, [and] justice in international relations”; respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity; support for multilateral architecture in the Asia-Pacific; concern over tensions and instability in the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific; and counterterrorism efforts.<sup>34</sup>

While the communiqué emphasized that the trilateral is not directed against any other country, Harsh Pant asserts that the dialogue is aimed at limiting U.S. expansionism and political power on the part of Russia and China, while India takes part due to a “growing concern that the USA is becoming too powerful and unilateral, and that a unipolar U.S.-dominated world is not in the best interests of weaker states like India.”<sup>35</sup> Abanti Bhattacharya has also written that the increased presence of the United States in Afghanistan and Central Asia after September 11 alarmed China and India and led them to refocus on pursuing trilateralism with Russia.<sup>36</sup>

While the issues discussed by representatives of China, Russia, and India are wide-ranging, their trilateral dialogues have not produced many specific initiatives beyond further trilateral meetings, including consultations on Asia-Pacific affairs, people-to-people exchanges, and academic conferences. Pant and Bhattacharya assert that this trilateral dialogue is unlikely to develop into a full-fledged “strategic triangle” to counter the United States because of the comprehensive ties each country has with the United States (rather than with each other) and the impossibility of balancing U.S. power on their own.<sup>37</sup> They also both argue that fluctuating tensions between India and China constrain the evolution of the trilateral meetings into a strategic triangle. At the current time, Russia, China, and especially India seem to be mainly utilizing these meetings to highlight their strategic autonomy to the rest of the world for their own reasons. In addition, Russia and China seem to be focused on gaining India’s public support for certain positions, especially those involving sovereignty and territorial integrity.<sup>38</sup>

The lack of concrete results from the trilateral dialogues indicates that trilateralism for the sake of trilateralism will not necessarily be an effective pathway to greater cooperation, reduced

<sup>33</sup> Harsh V. Pant, “The Moscow-Beijing-Delhi ‘Strategic Triangle’: An Idea Whose Time May Never Come,” *Security Dialogue* 35, no. 3 (2004): 311–12.

<sup>34</sup> “Joint Communiqué of the 15th Meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the Russian Federation, the Republic of India and the People’s Republic of China,” Ministry of External Affairs (India), December 11, 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Pant, “The Moscow-Beijing-Delhi ‘Strategic Triangle,’” 312–13.

<sup>36</sup> Abanti Bhattacharya, “The Fallacy in the Russia-India-China Triangle,” *Strategic Analysis* 28, no. 2 (2004): 358.

<sup>37</sup> Pant, “The Moscow-Beijing-Delhi ‘Strategic Triangle,’” 312–13.

<sup>38</sup> Ankit Panda, “Russia, India, China Address South China Sea in Trilateral Statement,” *Diplomat*, April 21, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/04/russia-india-china-address-south-china-sea-in-trilateral-statement>; and Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, “Russia-India-China Trilateral Meet: Modi to Flaunt Independent Foreign Policy,” *Economic Times*, December 6, 2017, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/russia-india-china-trilateral-meet-modi-to-flaunt-independent-foreign-policy/articleshow/61942597.cms>.

tensions, and concrete results, unless the three countries share realistic, specific goals. The United States, the ROK, and Japan do pursue many of the same goals, and their trilateral initiatives will be most successful when based on countering shared threats and promoting common interests rather than being carried out with unclear purposes.

### *China-Russia-Pakistan*

As India moves more toward Japan, Australia, and the United States, and tensions grow over the presence of Taliban leaders in Pakistan, Pakistan has sought support elsewhere to both counter India and address issues in its border regions. In December 2016, this resulted in a trilateral working group on Afghanistan that included Pakistan, its long-time ally China, and its Cold War competitor Russia.<sup>39</sup> They issued a statement calling for adopting a more flexible strategy toward regional extremists, including a suggestion to remove some Taliban figures from UN sanctions lists in exchange for further peace talks. Two similar meetings took place before this one that were not publicly disclosed until 2016.<sup>40</sup> In addition, in September 2017, China and Russia apparently assured Pakistan that “they would veto any U.S. move in the United Nations to slap sanctions on Islamabad.”<sup>41</sup> Some observers have argued that the three countries are moving steadily closer to each other in response to the Trump administration’s more aggressive stance toward Pakistan in its new Afghanistan strategy.<sup>42</sup>

The working group has so far been the only concrete manifestation of this trilateral grouping. Extremism in Afghanistan does present a threat to all three countries, but it also is an issue that is technically outside of their jurisdiction and therefore is difficult to address beyond mere dialogue. Furthermore, if the working group continues to meet in the future, it will not be limited to Pakistan, China, and Russia: after Afghan leaders objected to not being included in a dialogue on their own country, an invitation to future meetings was extended to them. It is unclear whether the relations among the three countries will grow into a true trilateral arrangement and whether any institutionalized mechanisms or trilateral initiatives will emerge.

China, Russia, and Pakistan’s trilateral coordination so far has focused narrowly on a specific threat: extremism emanating from Afghanistan. In comparison, while North Korea often dominates trilateral discussions among the United States, Japan, and South Korea, they have discussed other issues as well, such as maritime security and freedom of navigation. The China-Russia-Pakistan relationship is not without tension, as Pakistan has had a rocky relationship in the past with Russia. Their interests have aligned in recent years, however, and some have suggested that Russia’s efforts to bring China into the dialogue on Afghanistan have endeared Russia to Pakistani leaders.<sup>43</sup> By contrast, efforts by the United States to include Japan in discussions on North Korea have not had the same effect on Japan-ROK relations, likely due to the memory of Japan’s colonial history on the Korean Peninsula. Thus, a narrow focus on

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<sup>39</sup> Ayaz Gul, “China, Pakistan, Russia to Meet on Afghanistan, Angering Kabul Leaders,” *Voice of America*, December 26, 2016, <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-pakistan-russia-to-meet-on-afghanistan-angering-kabul-leaders/3651066.html>; and Baqir Sajjad Syed, “Pakistan, China, Russia Agree to Expand Talks on Afghanistan,” *Dawn*, December 28, 2016, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1304931>.

<sup>40</sup> Syed, “Pakistan, China, Russia Agree to Expand Talks on Afghanistan.”

<sup>41</sup> Amir Khan, “China, Russia to Veto Any U.S. Move at UN to Slap Sanctions on Pakistan,” *Express Tribune*, September 13, 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1504793/china-russia-veto-us-move-un-slap-sanctions-pakistan>.

<sup>42</sup> Kamran Yousaf, “Pakistan, Russia and China Inch Closer to Formal Alliance,” *Express Tribune*, April 3, 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1372490/pakistan-russia-china-inch-closer-formal-alliance>.

<sup>43</sup> Samuel Ramani, “What’s Driving Russia-Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan?” *Diplomat*, May 9, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/05/whats-driving-russia-pakistan-cooperation-on-afghanistan>.

a contested regional security issue would not be effective in this context, suggesting that the U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral needs to continue expanding into other areas.

### *India–Brazil–South Africa*

The India–Brazil–South Africa (IBSA) Dialogue Forum was first held in Brasília in June 2003 and has since served as a “south-south” trilateral mechanism for coordination and communication. Since 2003, there have been five IBSA summits, seven IBSA Trilateral Commission meetings, numerous meetings at the ministerial and senior-official levels, and meetings of various working groups.<sup>44</sup> At the Trilateral Ministerial Commission meeting in October 2017, General V.K. Singh, the Indian minister of state for external affairs, defined IBSA as “a unique platform for consultation, coordination and cooperation among the three democratic traditions from Asia, Africa, and Latin America,” noting that “there is much convergence in our world views on sustainable development, clean and healthy living, multilateral trading system, Doha Development Agenda, disarmament and non-proliferation.”<sup>45</sup>

The two most concrete products of IBSA are the IBSA Facility for the Alleviation of Poverty and Hunger, or the IBSA Fund, and the IBSAMAR naval exercises. Established in 2004 in partnership with the UN, the IBSA Fund identifies “replicable and scalable projects that can be disseminated to interested developing countries as an example of best practices in the fight against poverty and hunger,” with a specific focus on the least-developed countries and post-conflict reconstruction and development countries.<sup>46</sup> India, Brazil, and South Africa each contribute \$1 million per year to the fund.<sup>47</sup> IBSAMAR is a series of joint naval exercises that began in 2008.<sup>48</sup> The first exercise focused on human security scenarios, but by the fifth exercise in February 2016, the scope had expanded to include antisubmarine warfare; surface firings; air defense; visit, board, search, and seizure; flying operations; and tactical procedures.<sup>49</sup>

Ruchita Beri observes that IBSA is “considered by some as a more benign example” of “the emerging multipolar tendencies of countervailing coalitions of forces aimed at containing and ‘soft balancing’ American unilateralism.”<sup>50</sup> In response to recommendations to merge IBSA activities into the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) framework, Oliver Stuenkel argued in 2012 that IBSA would be more effective as a trilateral format due to India, Brazil, and South Africa’s shared identities as democracies, the absence of fluctuating tensions to constrain ties, and their support for more inclusive international institutions.<sup>51</sup> Yet Beri writes that while IBSA has moved beyond the mere rhetoric of the China-Russia-India trilateral dialogue into more substantial cooperation, sectoral cooperation has progressed more at the bilateral than the

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<sup>44</sup> V.K. Singh, “Opening Remarks” (IBSA Trilateral Ministerial Commission meeting, Durban, October 17, 2017).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> “IBSA Fund,” India–Brazil–South Africa Dialogue Forum, <http://www.ibsa-trilateral.org/about-ibsa/ibsa-fund>.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Gurpreet S. Khurana, “India–Brazil–South Africa ‘Tango’ at Sea,” Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, May 16, 2008, [https://idsa.in/idsastrategiccomments/IndiaBrazilSouthAfricaTangoatSea\\_GSKhurana\\_160508](https://idsa.in/idsastrategiccomments/IndiaBrazilSouthAfricaTangoatSea_GSKhurana_160508).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.; and “‘Exercise IBSAMAR’ between India, South Africa, Brazil Begins on Friday,” DNA, <http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-exercise-ibsamarm-between-india-south-africa-brazil-begins-on-friday-2179427>.

<sup>50</sup> Ruchita Beri, “IBSA Dialogue Forum: An Assessment,” *Strategic Analysis* 32, no. 5 (2008): 810.

<sup>51</sup> Oliver Stuenkel, “Keep BRICS and IBSA Separate,” *Diplomat*, August 13, 2012, <https://thediplomat.com/2012/08/keep-the-brics-and-ibsa-seperate>.

trilateral level, and competition and disagreements between the three countries could hold back future cooperation.<sup>52</sup>

IBSA is similar in some respects to the U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral, especially in the common values that the countries in both trilaterals share as democratic states. However, India, Brazil, and South Africa do not have a similarly contentious shared history, and the populations in those countries are not as wary of cooperation with the other countries as many South Koreans and Japanese are. Perhaps because of this key difference, IBSA has been relatively successful in producing concrete results, such as the IBSA Fund, compared with other trilateral groupings. Yet despite this difference, the success of the IBSA Fund suggests that a similar humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) project extending outside the immediate East Asian region might be a way to strengthen U.S.-ROK-Japan ties.

### *U.S.-ROK-Japan*

The U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral partnership has ebbed and flowed in strength over the decades. Immediately following the Korean War, the United States encouraged its two allies to settle the historical issues remaining from the legacies of Japanese colonialism and to normalize relations against the backdrop of the Cold War.<sup>53</sup> However, normalization did not occur for over a decade, and even after it did in 1965, tensions between the ROK and Japan continued to flare up periodically around sensitive historical issues.

As still remains the case today, the single-largest unifying factor in bringing the three states together in security cooperation was increasingly pressing concerns over North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons in the late 1980s and the 1990s. With the establishment of the TCOG in 1999, the three states worked toward a unified policy response on this issue, later giving way to the broader multilateral efforts of the six-party talks. In the early 2000s, a renewed emphasis on trilateral security cooperation accompanied the United States' push for a coordinated regional strategy that could utilize resources from all three countries to face an increasingly complex security environment.<sup>54</sup> While other trilateral partnerships have emerged based on shared threats, none has been faced with such a dangerous and imminent threat as the one that North Korea poses to these three partners.

Against the backdrop of the North Korea threat, the trilateral relationship continued to have periods of both increased tension and increased cooperation throughout the mid to late 2000s. South Korea remained wary that the trilateral relationship would be perceived or used as a balance to China, raising tensions in the U.S.-ROK alliance under the Roh Moo-hyun government, while history issues persisted in inhibiting progress on greater security cooperation between the ROK and Japan.

In the early years of the Park Geun-hye government in South Korea and the Shinzo Abe government in Japan, trilateral relations seemed to face an impasse, with two strong nationalist leaders in power and public sentiments in both countries inflamed over history issues. However, in 2014 the leaders of all three countries held a trilateral meeting on the sidelines of the Nuclear

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<sup>52</sup> Beri, "IBSA Dialogue Forum," 818.

<sup>53</sup> Daniel Sneider, "Advancing U.S.-Japan-ROK Trilateral Cooperation: A U.S. Perspective," National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), Brief, March 30, 2016, <http://www.nbr.org/research/activity.aspx?id=662>.

<sup>54</sup> Yul Sohn, "Relocating Trilateralism in a Broader Regional Architecture: A South Korean Perspective," NBR, Brief, March 25, 2016, <http://www.nbr.org/research/activity.aspx?id=660>.



Security Summit, followed by additional high-level meetings that made progress on military information sharing and military exercises.<sup>55</sup>

The benefits from and challenges to the trilateral partnerships explored above have direct long-term implications for U.S.-ROK-Japan cooperation. First, trilateral cooperation is likely to bring great benefits to each member state in the realm of security. Three-way cooperation in dealing with regional security threats, with North Korea being the key priority, can contribute to all three states' heightened readiness and effectiveness by marshaling their resources and intelligence to achieve a common security goal. As North Korea relentlessly advances its military ambitions through the development of nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) technology with the growing capability to reach the mainland United States, the need to cooperate on the security front is ever more pressing.

Second, by placing two U.S.-led bilateral alliances within the structure of trilateralism, the United States can effectively embolden its extended-deterrence commitments to Japan and South Korea. North Korea's military provocations increasingly pose existential threats to both countries, which in turn magnifies calls for a renewed U.S. commitment to provide adequate extended deterrence to these allies that have long relied on the U.S. nuclear umbrella. Without credible U.S. extended deterrence, the appetite in South Korea and Japan for the development of a nuclear capability independent of the United States will likely grow, thereby possibly engendering a nuclear arms race in the region. Constructing a stable security mechanism based on trilateral cooperation would signal the United States' commitment and ability to ensure extended deterrence.

Additionally, there is an argument to be made that U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateralism will serve as a solid anchor for broader Asian regionalism. The three nations share common democratic political systems and interdependent market economies, rendering them indispensable to each other. Furthermore, Japan and South Korea, despite their historical tensions, share aspirations to preserve democratic values such as human rights and freedom that bind these U.S. allies together as natural partners.

Last, U.S.-ROK-Japan cooperation can function as a great mechanism to advance efforts in nontraditional security arenas. As these three nations represent nearly a third of the world economy, their joint efforts to deal with HADR could greatly complement each other's endeavors and bring productive results.<sup>56</sup>

Despite its merits, U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateralism is not free from the challenges mentioned earlier. In particular, it has the potential to provoke a sense of insecurity in other neighbors, most notably China, which sees this configuration as a means to encircle and inhibit its rise. Chinese opposition and the ensuing regional tension could constrain the scope and details of the trilateral partnership by changing member countries' calculus on the cost and benefits of cooperation. A potent example of this risk is South Korea's decision to review the deployment of THAAD in response to China's fierce objections. After the United States and South Korea agreed to deploy the missile defense system in 2016, China initiated *de facto* economic sanctions against South Korean companies, along with imposing penalties in other areas, such as tourism, that were meant to increase the economic costs to South Korea. These actions at least partially influenced the thinking of the Moon Jae-in administration. China has also claimed that, as part of "normalization" talks to resolve the dispute over THAAD, South Korea agreed to install no further anti-ballistic missile

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<sup>55</sup> Sohn, "Relocating Trilateralism in a Broader Regional Architecture."

<sup>56</sup> World Bank, "Gross Domestic Product 2016" World Development Indicators Databank, <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP.pdf>.

systems and to refrain from joining a regional U.S. missile defense system or a military alliance with both the United States and Japan.<sup>57</sup> In a statement to South Korea's parliament, Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha argued that these assurances were simply confirmations of preexisting policy.<sup>58</sup> Thus, China's reaction to U.S.-ROK-Japan cooperation can constrain the effectiveness of the trilateral relationship.

In addition, as discussed above, the trilateral partnership is especially vulnerable to bilateral constraints due to acrimonious relations between the ROK and Japan based on Japan's colonial legacy. The two U.S. allies have struggled for many years to overcome their historical animosity and build patterns of enduring cooperation. Disputes over territory and historical issues stemming from Japan's occupation of Korea routinely resurface between the two nations, rendering meaningful cooperation extremely challenging. These disputes increase the political costs to leaders who seek to facilitate meaningful cooperation and greatly narrow the space available for it. Moreover, tenuous bilateral relations raise the cost of managing the trilateral partnership, thereby diminishing its overall benefits. As this dilution effect intensifies, participating countries will feel greater pressure to opt out of the trilateral grouping and to work through the traditional channels of bilateral alliances or alternative multilateral forms of cooperation.

## Priority Areas for Trilateral Cooperation

The preceding analysis shows that to foster successful trilateralism between the United States, South Korea, and Japan, it is necessary to consider ways to enhance the benefits of the partnership while effectively mitigating the issues that undermine coordination. To this end, the remainder of the report examines major avenues by which the three countries can work together to deepen trilateral cooperation in the following areas: traditional security, nontraditional security, energy security, and emerging domains. After a brief review of the recent progress or roadblocks to cooperation in each area, specific policy recommendations are offered to foster cooperation.

### *Traditional Security*

While greater trilateral cooperation on traditional security has been a priority of experts and policymakers for decades, the topic has come to the forefront of public discussion in the past year, and even more so in recent months, due in large part to North Korea's missile and nuclear weapons activities. In July 2017, North Korea conducted two ICBM tests, the second of which demonstrated a capability to reach the mainland United States. In September, North Korea conducted an underground nuclear test of what was reported to be a hydrogen bomb small enough to fit onto an ICBM.<sup>59</sup> North Korea also launched missiles over the Japanese island of Hokkaido in August and September, and in response to comments by President Donald Trump deriding Kim Jong-un, a North Korean official threatened the test of a hydrogen bomb over the

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<sup>57</sup> David Josef Volodzko, "China Wins Its War Against South Korea's U.S. THAAD Missile Shield—Without Firing a Shot," *South China Morning Post*, November 18, 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/week-asia/geopolitics/article/2120452/china-wins-its-war-against-south-koreas-us-thaad-missile>.

<sup>58</sup> "FM Dismisses Chinese Media's Calls to Restrict THAAD Operations," Yonhap, November 27, 2017, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/search/1/2603000000.html?cid=AEN20171127010700315>.

<sup>59</sup> "Report: N. Korea's Last Nuclear Test Caused Quake That Killed Dozens," Voice of America, November 26, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/report-says-north-korea-september-quake-killed-dozens/4137033.html>.

Pacific Ocean.<sup>60</sup> On November 29, North Korea conducted a test of the Hwasong-15 missile, which experts estimate could have a range of more than 8,100 miles.<sup>61</sup> Also in November, a UN special investigation team found that the North Korean army violated the Korean Armistice Agreement twice by firing weapons across the mutual defense line and crossing the line in pursuit of a defector.<sup>62</sup>

While changes in the domestic political situations in the United States and the ROK have necessitated some reassessment of bilateral and trilateral relations, in the security realm the rationale for greater security cooperation between the United States, South Korea, and Japan has never been more urgent. In a September 2017 trilateral summit meeting, President Trump, Prime Minister Abe, and President Moon discussed “Japan-U.S.-ROK security and defense cooperation from the standpoint of protecting the safety and peace of the three countries’ citizens, and shared the view that they advance their cooperation,” according to a statement from Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>63</sup>

Positive momentum in strengthening security cooperation has been building for several years, with concrete achievements such as the ROK and Japan signing the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) in November 2016, after over four years of negotiations. The GSOMIA between the ROK and Japan establishes the basis for greater information sharing among all three nations. Despite controversy in the Japanese press over information being withheld by South Korea on issues not directly related to North Korea’s nuclear and missile testing, the deal was extended for another year in August 2017.<sup>64</sup> All three countries have also stepped up efforts at tactical and technical coordination in ballistic missile defense, conducting the biennial Pacific Dragon trilateral ballistic missile defense tracking exercise in June 2016, and continue to hold joint military exercises in the face of escalating North Korean aggression.

However, tensions still slow the development of trilateral security cooperation. South Korea rejected joint Japanese involvement in military drills with the United States during Trump’s trip to Asia in November 2017, leading the United States to conduct separate drills with each country’s navy.<sup>65</sup> Additionally, Foreign Minister Kang’s statement that South Korea would install no further THAAD batteries, refrain from joining a regional U.S.-led missile defense system, and refuse to form a military alliance with both the United States and Japan underlined the ROK’s hesitation to pursue closer cooperation with Japan.

At the diplomatic level, several ongoing dialogue mechanisms have strengthened discussion and coordination on security issues. The three nations held the ninth meeting of the Defense Trilateral Talks in April 2017, importantly underscoring that trilateral cooperation would continue to be a priority in the Trump administration. Additionally, annual trilateral defense ministerial

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<sup>60</sup> Anna Fifield, “North Korean Missile Flies over Japan, Escalating Tensions and Prompting an Angry Response from Tokyo,” *Washington Post*, August 28, 2017; and Hyonhee Shin and Linda Sieg, “A North Korea Nuclear Test over the Pacific? Logical, Terrifying,” Reuters, September 22, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-missiles-atmospheric-test/a-north-korea-nuclear-test-over-the-pacific-logical-terrifying-idUSKCN1BX0W5>.

<sup>61</sup> Anna Fifield, “North Korea’s Latest Missile Launch Appears to Put U.S. Capital in Range,” *Washington Post*, November 29, 2017.

<sup>62</sup> U.S. Forces Korea, “North Korean Defection Update,” November 21, 2017.

<sup>63</sup> “Japan-U.S.-ROK Trilateral Summit Meeting,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), September 21, 2017, [http://www.mofa.go.jp/a\\_o/na/kr/page3e\\_000758.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kr/page3e_000758.html); and “Readout of President Donald J. Trump’s Trilateral Meeting with Prime Minister Abe of Japan and President Moon of the Republic of Korea,” White House, Office of the Press Secretary, September 22, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/09/22/readout-president-donald-j-trumps-trilateral-meeting-prime-minister-abe>.

<sup>64</sup> “Prudence Required,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, November 27, 2017, <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3041285>.

<sup>65</sup> Hiroshi Minegishi, “South Korea Rejected Japan Involvement in Joint Military Drills,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, November 13, 2017, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/International-Relations/South-Korea-rejected-Japan-involvement-in-joint-US-military-drills>.

meetings have been held on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore every year since 2010, and a new trilateral cooperation mechanism, the Trilateral Vice Foreign Ministerial Meeting established in April 2015, focuses on shared security concerns, including the North Korea threat and maritime issues. The following recommendations identify options for improving trilateral cooperation on traditional security.

*Trilateral military exercises and coordination are worthwhile.* While the rapid progress in missile defense coordination over the last eighteen months is positive, the administrations in Seoul and Washington need to continue to prioritize such cooperation going forward and avoid the temptation to discard existing mechanisms simply because they were developed by previous administrations. Trilateral cooperation has the biggest impact on naval ballistic missile defense, especially Aegis ship-based systems. Japan is deploying Aegis Ashore on an accelerated basis. Although the ROK has not adopted the same approach and only possesses Aegis ship-based radar without SM-3 missiles, holding further trilateral training exercises with Aegis capabilities is critically important to maintain a credible defense against North Korea's ballistic missiles.

*Japan must proceed carefully in promoting trilateral cooperation, and the ROK should work to minimize the damage to trilateral trust when focusing on domestic politics.* ROK officials remain invested in deepening cooperation to increase preparedness and coordination against shared threats. However, South Korean interlocutors emphasize that they have weighed the domestic political cost, and that progress needs to be made at the ROK's pace. Japan will do well to remain sensitive to that pace, despite a strong desire to accelerate the process. At the same time, in Japan there is growing frustration over the slow pace of Korean understanding of the strategic situation in Northeast Asia, which could damage the potential trust between the countries in the long run. While Japan will need to continue proceeding at a careful pace, the ROK should consider the negative impact on confidence in trilateral security cooperation of mixing domestic politics and strategic responses toward common challenges in Northeast Asia.

*The trilateral partners must work very hard to maintain alliance solidarity vis-à-vis North Korea.* Several external factors continue to put pressure on the partners' solidarity against the North Korean threat, including China's "wedge" strategies to separate allies over the THAAD issue, Russia's downplaying of the strength of the Kim Jong-un regime's challenge, and domestic political movements in both the ROK and Japan. The Japanese government should side with the Moon administration on THAAD, and both governments should continue to address defense cooperation on North Korean issues at a high level. Top leaders are in a unique position to change the mindset of a public that still doubts the value of bilateral or trilateral security cooperation. They should emphasize the necessity of such cooperation again and again.

### *Nontraditional Security*

The opportunities for trilateral cooperation on nontraditional security are less structured and often considered less pressing than those in the traditional security realm. Yet they offer tangible benefits if the three nations can figure out how to address these issues in a way that is constructive for the broader relationship. The main avenues for nontraditional security cooperation that have been identified in the past are HADR, peacekeeping, and antipiracy.

All three nations have established capabilities and resources for HADR, making it an area ripe for future trilateral cooperation. Japan and South Korea have in recent years provided humanitarian assistance inside and outside Asia but have not cooperated on any projects, despite

being present in the same nations. For example, both countries have worked on projects in the Philippines over the past year, with the Korean Red Cross establishing a hurricane response center in April 2017 in Passi, Iloilo, and the Japan International Cooperation Agency carrying out numerous projects across the Philippines (including in Iloilo).<sup>66</sup> The United States and Japan already have robust cooperation on HADR, as evidenced during Operation Tomodachi following the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami.<sup>67</sup>

Participation in multilateral peacekeeping operations is generally seen as a way for U.S. allies to assume greater responsibility for burden sharing with the United States. Although Japan has been quite active in peacekeeping operations in the past, its last ongoing peacekeeping operation in the UN Mission in South Sudan ended in May 2017. The operation had been a source of controversy over ammunition sharing between South Korean and Japanese troops, which illustrates some of the limitations on bilateral cooperation even as far abroad as Africa.<sup>68</sup>

Other prospects for instability and insecurity in the region still exist. There are concerns over the upcoming Olympic Games in Tokyo in 2020, including over cyberterrorism. The CEO of the Tokyo Olympics has noted that “the level of threat that terrorism poses gets more and more complicated each year. No one knows how sophisticated [terrorism] will have become by 2020.”<sup>69</sup> All three countries also worry that growing instability on the Korean Peninsula could lead to a humanitarian disaster, including a nuclear accident or refugee crisis. The following recommendations detail additional considerations for improving trilateral cooperation on nontraditional security.

*HADR cooperation efforts are necessary, and useful, first steps.* As a principle, trilateral HADR training and deployment should focus first on areas far away from Northeast Asia, since political and historical issues become less sensitive at a greater distance. In particular, the three countries have the capabilities and equipment to conduct training in multilateral settings in Southeast Asia. With natural disasters a regular occurrence in the region, there will be frequent occasions to gain experience that could be applied to a contingency situation on the Korean Peninsula.

*The three countries should continue to be open to cooperation on peacekeeping as a way to build patterns of behavior and strengthen ties.* The United States, the ROK, and Japan are not currently participating in a peacekeeping mission together, but they have done so in the past. Of note, Japan and Australia’s robust security relationship began with cooperation on peacekeeping operations in East Timor, and a similar model could be considered to improve cooperation between Japan and the ROK.

*Antipiracy is a fertile area for cooperation between the ROK and Japan.* Both countries have contributed to counterpiracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden since 2009 without running into conflict with one another. Less domestic scrutiny is paid to their cooperation in this area in part because of the distance of antipiracy operations from Northeast Asia. Given this past success, it may be time for South Korea and Japan to cooperate on similar initiatives closer to home.

<sup>66</sup> “S. Korea Establishes Disaster Response Center in Typhoon-Hit Philippines,” Yonhap, April 24, 2017, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/news/2017/04/24/0200000000AEN20170424010300315.html>. For a map of the Japan International Cooperation Agency’s operations in the Philippines, see Japan International Cooperation Agency, “JICA Philippines Annual Report 2016,” 2016, 40–41, [https://www.jica.go.jp/philippine/english/activities/c8h0vm00004cez31-att/index\\_01.pdf](https://www.jica.go.jp/philippine/english/activities/c8h0vm00004cez31-att/index_01.pdf).

<sup>67</sup> See Thomas B. Fargo et al., “Preparing for Future Disasters: Strategic Assistance and the U.S.-Japan Alliance,” NBR, Special Report, June 2015.

<sup>68</sup> “Japan to Withdraw from South Sudan Peacekeeping Mission,” Reuters, March 10, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-southsudan-military/japan-to-withdraw-from-south-sudan-peacekeeping-mission-idUSKBN16H11D>.

<sup>69</sup> Andrew McKirdy, “2020 Tokyo Olympics CEO Weighs In on Security, Differences with Rio,” *Japan Times*, April 4, 2014, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/04/04/national/2020-tokyo-olympics-ceo-weighs-security-differences-rio/#.WoHJHejwaUk>.



## Energy Security

Lower oil and gas prices, as well as the shift to a buyer's market and more diversified sourcing, have significantly affected the energy outlook in Northeast Asia. Japan is the world's largest buyer of liquefied natural gas (LNG), with South Korea following closely behind.<sup>70</sup> Although demand for LNG has decreased due to cheaper coal prices and restarted nuclear reactors in Japan, it is unlikely that the volume of LNG being imported to Japan will significantly decrease. Likewise, the ROK's new energy plan aims to significantly expand the use of renewables, while also increasing natural gas use over the next fifteen years.<sup>71</sup> Overall, the supply of LNG to the Asia-Pacific is expected to sharply rise by 2020, partly owing to exports from North America.<sup>72</sup> Both South Korea and Japan have been seeking to diversify their energy sources in order to reduce their vulnerability at chokepoints in the South China Sea—Japan by increasing imports of natural gas from the United States and South Korea by increasing its LNG trade with Russia.<sup>73</sup>

Bilateral cooperation on energy security has progressed more than trilateral cooperation. In November 2017, the Trump and Abe administrations announced the Japan–United States Strategic Energy Partnership “to promote universal access to affordable and reliable energy in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa,” as well as the signing of a memorandum of cooperation “to bring high-quality energy infrastructure solutions to the Indo-Pacific region” between Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry and the U.S. Trade and Development Agency.<sup>74</sup> Likewise, in a joint statement released shortly after their meeting, Presidents Trump and Moon announced that several memoranda of understanding had been signed between the Korea Gas Corporation (KOGAS) and U.S. natural gas and hydrocarbon extraction companies.<sup>75</sup> The following recommendations describe steps that the United States, South Korea, and Japan could take to improve trilateral cooperation on energy security.

*Leaders should explore coordinated government incentive plans with regard to establishing a regional trading hub for natural gas, with the ROK and Japan playing leading roles.* Asian natural gas markets have traditionally been linked to crude oil prices and long-term contracts, conditions that have distorted natural gas and LNG prices. As these original long-term contracts expire and more supply becomes available, there is an opportunity for countries to establish a reliable price index and regional trading hubs that better reflect market dynamics. However, governments must proceed cautiously and with minimal intervention, allowing markets to play leading roles to ensure transparency.

<sup>70</sup> Jeremy Maxie and Tatsuo Masuda, “Next Steps toward Allied Energy Security,” NBR, Commentary, December 20, 2017, <http://www.nbr.org/research/activity.aspx?id=827>; and Jeremy Maxie and Tatsuo Masuda, “Allied Energy Security: The Role of U.S. Oil and LNG Exports in U.S. Relations with Japan and South Korea,” NBR, Working Paper, June 19, 2017, <http://www.nbr.org/research/activity.aspx?id=781>.

<sup>71</sup> “South Korea Finalizes Energy Plan to Boost Renewable Power Generation,” Reuters, December 29, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-energy-policy/south-korea-finalizes-energy-plan-to-boost-renewable-power-generation-idUSKBN1EN0KT>.

<sup>72</sup> Younkyyoo Kim, “Rethinking Energy Security in Northeast Asia under Lower Oil Prices: A South Korean Perspective,” NBR, Pacific Energy Summit, Brief, June 21, 2016, <http://www.nbr.org/research/activity.aspx?id=703>.

<sup>73</sup> “Sustainable Futures: Energy and Environmental Security in Times of Transition,” NBR, Pacific Energy Summit, Report, 2016, [http://www.nbr.org/downloads/pdfs/eta/PES\\_2016\\_report.pdf](http://www.nbr.org/downloads/pdfs/eta/PES_2016_report.pdf).

<sup>74</sup> “President Donald J. Trump's Visit to Japan Strengthens the United States–Japan Alliance and Economic Partnership,” White House, Fact Sheet, November 5, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trumps-visit-japan-strengthens-united-states-japan-alliance-economic-partnership>.

<sup>75</sup> “Joint Press Release by the United States of America and the Republic of Korea,” White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Press Release, November 8, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/11/08/joint-press-release-united-states-america-and-republic-korea>. In contrast, in a trilateral setting, Chinese, South Korean, and Japanese state-owned gas companies (China National Offshore Oil Corporation, KOGAS, and JERA) formed an LNG buyers alliance by signing a memorandum of understanding on business cooperation in April 2017 in hopes of increasing their negotiating power. See Mark Tay, “Talk of Tokyo: LNG Trio to Test Leverage in Push to Free-Up Purchases,” Reuters, April 2, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-gastech-preview/talk-of-tokyo-lng-trio-to-test-leverage-in-push-to-free-up-purchases-idUSKBN174YD>.

*Trilateral planning could be helpful in building a fleet of LNG transport ships and terminals in the ROK and Japan.* In order to establish a regional trading hub, significant investments in infrastructure are needed in Northeast Asia. Constructing the necessary receiving terminals, plants for regasification, and ships to transport fuel is extremely costly. The ROK's shipbuilding industry, which has traditionally been a leader in supplying the global demand for vessels, is slumping. However, there is an opportunity to build more LNG transport ships as demand grows not only in Asia but in other regional markets as well. While LNG is cheaper than oil, the transport ships are much more expensive and sophisticated than oil tankers, as some of these ships can also serve as floating storage and regasification terminals. In order for Northeast Asia to benefit from the burgeoning supply of LNG, the United States, South Korea, and Japan should consider cooperating on efforts to invest in the necessary infrastructure to bring energy to the region.

*The United States should start with its allies in revising rules on LNG exports.* Streamlining U.S. policy on energy exports will be an important driver of new patterns of energy trading in Northeast Asia. Given the United States' special economic relations with the ROK and Japan, it makes sense to focus on these countries when building more official energy trading networks.

### *Emerging Domains*

The United States, the ROK, and Japan share strategic interests on several important issues in emerging domains such as space and cybersecurity. All three nations have faced recent cyberattacks from both North Korea and China targeting critical infrastructure, defense-related industries, and other sectors. Attacks from North Korea include the 2016 WannaCry computer worm, the theft of classified documents from a South Korean military database (including a U.S.-ROK wartime operational plan and a "decapitation" plan), and the possible planting of "digital sleeper cells" in South Korea's critical infrastructure.<sup>76</sup> Chinese hackers also targeted South Korean government, military, and private industry systems in 2017, apparently over the installation of THAAD. This extended to an intelligence-gathering intrusion into parties directly associated with the missile system.

Despite these shared threats, elements of distrust continue in the relationship between Japan and South Korea, and the reluctance of the two countries to collaborate is one of the key obstacles to trilateral cooperation. Both nations' defense ministries emphasized the importance of international cooperation on cybersecurity in their 2016 defense white papers but avoided mentioning this issue in the context of their bilateral relationship. Instead, cybersecurity is included as a target for increased cooperation within their alliances with the United States. Representatives from Japan did, however, attend the 2017 Seoul Defense Dialogue, which included a cyber working group, and both nations' computer emergency response teams cooperate on the Asia-Pacific Computer Emergency Response Team.

Space seems to have become a lower priority for the ROK government, with no new projects announced by South Korea's space organization since 2012, while Japan continues its cooperation through the International Space Station.<sup>77</sup> From 2004 to at least 2015, Japan and the ROK

<sup>76</sup> David E. Sanger, David D. Kirkpatrick, and Nicole Perlroth, "The World Once Laughed at North Korean Cyberpower. No More." *New York Times*, October 15, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/15/world/asia/north-korea-hacking-cyber-sony.html>.

<sup>77</sup> Tae-jun Kang, "South Korea's Only Astronaut Retires," *Diplomat*, June 27, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/06/south-koreas-only-astronaut-retires>.

cooperated through the Japan-Korea Joint Seminar on Space Environment Utilization Research.<sup>78</sup> The following recommendations suggest strategies for fostering cooperation in the cyber and space domains.

*The United States, South Korea, and Japan should forge a trilateral consensus on norms and conventions in the cyber domain as a basis for further cooperation.* The United States, South Korea, and Japan share many values in the cyber domain and thus have an opportunity to work together to define international norms and conventions in the field. They also face common threats to their national interests from cyber intrusions. However, each country perceives its principal threat as coming from a different direction. Japan is primarily concerned about threats from China, while for the ROK the primary threats are based in North Korea. The United States, for its part, faces threats from many different directions, including China, Russia, and North Korea. The three nations need an organizing principle or galvanizing event to spur further collaboration.

*The three countries could hold regular cybersecurity defense exercises.* With the positive momentum in trilateral naval ballistic missile defense training exercises, the United States, the ROK, and Japan could begin working toward cybersecurity defense exercises. These could be held at U.S. Cyber Command, at least initially, and existing training exercises could be modified for and tailored to the trilateral setting.

*In the space domain, sharing situational awareness may be an area to begin a trilateral dialogue.* There are several high-priority missions to improve space situational awareness that may be ripe for near-term trilateral cooperation. Although space debris is not yet a critical concern, the trend line is worrisome. The three nations should share data to track space debris and work to develop norms for retrieving objects launched in to space.

## Conclusion

Given the increasingly acute security challenges in East Asia, trilateral cooperation between the United States, the ROK, and Japan is more important than ever. Whether directed toward North Korea's belligerent pursuit of nuclear and missile weapons or China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea, a more concerted approach from the three nations is crucial. An important part of this approach should be situating the trilateral relationship within a broader understanding of the nature of trilateralism in the international system. It is useful to acknowledge both the structural benefits and limitations of trilateral arrangements and to draw lessons from the comparative cases that exist. The cases explored in this report help give context to the impressive accomplishments of the U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral relationship in comparison with other trilaterals, which have mostly made significantly less concrete, substantive progress in recent decades. Several of these cases underscore that trilateral initiatives will be most successful when they are based on countering shared threats and promoting concrete, common interests, rather than being carried out for the sake of doing something together.

While the momentum for U.S.-ROK-Japan cooperation continues in all four of the thematic areas identified, it has notably slowed. On the one hand, coordination between Japan and the ROK has not been smooth due to the lack of strategic trust. On the other hand, there are continuing

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<sup>78</sup> "The Japan-Korea Joint Seminar on Space Environment Utilization Research," Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency, 2007, <http://iss.jaxa.jp/en/kuoa/jk-joint.html>.

concerns about the U.S. commitment to the region. The three nations must work together to address the lingering tensions and concerns that inhibit greater trilateral cooperation.

The United States cannot safeguard its interests and preserve a rules-based order in Asia without its two key allies, Japan and South Korea. Washington should continue to assure these critical allies of its commitment to the region and lead efforts to strengthen the trilateral partnership. Likewise, the governments in Seoul and Tokyo should become stronger advocates of trilateralism and make the case to U.S. policymakers of the importance of trilateral cooperation for U.S. interests.









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