

US/ASIA: JUSROK-ing in the free world

- The Camp David gathering on 18 August was the first ever standalone summit between the United States, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (hereafter, JUSROK).
- Significant outcomes included a “commitment to consult” on security matters, enhanced security cooperation activities, and a wide range of new top-level trilateral institutions including annual summits.
- The aim is to normalize, formalize, and regularize trilateral ties in response to shared regional concerns, and make it costly for successors to renege.

Historic outcomes

The summit produced multiple documents—including a statement of shared principles, a longer “Spirit of Camp David” communiqué, and a Fact Sheet—which together contain several key takeaways. First, on the defense/security front, the three sides made a “commitment to consult trilaterally... [to coordinate] responses to regional challenges, provocations, and threats that affect our collective interests and security.” While short of a NATO-type mutual defense commitment, this was still an unprecedented statement of mutually aligned security, moving closer to a true security pact. Another significant new defense element will be “annual, named, multi-domain trilateral exercises”, while the three sides also confirmed plans to operationalize real-time data-sharing for missile defense purposes by year-end.

Second, the Spirit of Camp David document creates an extensive new institutional framework, the out-workings of which should be felt regularly for many years to come. There will be annual meetings at the levels of leaders, foreign ministers, defense ministers, and national security advisors, respectively; finance, commerce/industry, and economic security ministerials will also be held regularly. This multiplicity of cabinet-level dialogues throughout each calendar year should generate ongoing momentum for new agendas and deliverables, focused particularly on North Korea, China, and Russia.

Other notable takeaways included a commitment to counter disinformation (with China in mind), opening opportunities for the three to work together in the Pacific Islands and the ‘Global South’; and a commitment to reduce dependence on Russian energy, which is likely to lead to new opportunities in nuclear and gas cooperation. Economic security was also again highlighted as an area of focus, providing another building block towards the Biden administration’s [Indo-Pacific Economic Framework](#) (IPEF) agenda.

Carpe diem

The United States has long sought active trilateral cooperation to complement its respective bilateral ties [with Japan](#) and [South Korea](#), its two treaty allies in the East Asia region. However, deep sensitivities on the Korean side—due to an extremely painful colonial history with Japan—has until now frustrated the development of such a framework. Such historical frictions had left bilateral relations at a 50-year nadir just 18 months ago.

Circumstances changed gradually, then rapidly. First, the three sides’ security outlooks became more closely aligned than ever, perceiving similar challenges from Pyongyang, Beijing, and Moscow. Russia’s unprovoked invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 raised not only direct parallel concerns about a Taiwan contingency but also indirect fears that North Korea could use such a moment—with US military forces stretched—to attempt something opportunistic on the Korean peninsula.

Second, South Korean president Yoon Suk-yeol since taking office in May 2022 has invested significant political capital into improving relations with Japan as a precursor to fully resolving overhanging historical issues, rather than taking his immediate predecessor’s path of making the resolution of such issues a precondition of cooperation. Yoon paved the way for the historical [forced labor issue agreement](#) in March 2023, which led to the resumption of [shuttle diplomacy](#) in the Spring and South Korea’s invitation to attend the G7 summit hosted by Japan in May. After an unprecedented period of non-dialogue, the three leaders have met four times in the last fourteen months.

Moreover, the Biden administration understood that this current alignment was not guaranteed to last and could be undone by future leaders in one or more of the three countries who opposed cooperation. Hence, one of the underlying goals of the Camp David summit was to normalize, formalize, and regularize trilateral ties across diplomatic, security, and economic domains, and make it costly for possible successors to abandon them.

China's response

The trilateral agreement adds to a new US-led [network of security arrangements](#) in the region under Biden that Beijing views as an attempt at military encirclement. These arrangements include Aukus, an [expanded basing agreement](#) with the Philippines, 'Partners in the Blue Pacific', and the evolving [Quadrilateral Security Dialog](#); more is expected with Vietnam as well. Beijing lodged formal complaints with Tokyo and Seoul over the Camp David meeting, where the official readout included explicit criticisms of China's "dangerous and aggressive behavior" in the South China Sea.

Ultimately, however, Beijing is largely resigned to the fact that most Asian governments will tilt towards Washington on security issues, while Beijing's regional influence relies more on its economic clout. But China will continue to flex military muscle through calibrated naval provocations in the South China Sea, military exercises around Taiwan, and joint exercises with Russia near Japan and Alaska.

Outlook

Having invested so much in diplomatic efforts, low-polling President Yoon will hope the new trilateral framework brings near-term domestic dividends for his administration and his conservative People Power Party, ahead of the 2024 National Assembly general election. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, whose own public support numbers have again [slumped recently](#), could also get a bump from securing such a major diplomatic achievement. That it was achieved without making new concessions to South Korea should insulate him from criticism from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's cantankerous right wing.

The Biden administration, meanwhile, will hope to use the new JUSROK framework as a springboard for a wide-ranging IPEF deal that it can announce at the APEC summit to be held in San Francisco in November. Movement in this direction is likely on the sidelines of September's ASEAN-focused East Asia Summit in Jakarta.

Longer-term, no diplomatic deal between liberal democracies can ever be fully future-proofed. The Camp David frameworks significantly raise the cost for any South Korean leader from a left/liberal perspective to change course, while it seems unlikely that a future Japanese prime minister would want to roll back the deal. Perhaps above all, the Camp David outcomes make it harder for a future US leader with a narrower view of national interests from trying to renege on trilateral cooperation.

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