

The Emergence of Multipolarity and the Future of Alliances—Thinking about Sustainability of the Korea-US-Japan Strategic Triangle

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Abstract

This article examines the evolving dynamics of the South Korea-U.S.-Japan relations against the backdrop of an increasingly volatile global order. It reflects on two major ongoing wars—Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the conflict between Israel and Hamas—and discusses how these events compel nations to reassess their geopolitical strategies. It explores the trilateral cooperation among South Korea, the United States, and Japan, emphasizing shared concerns such as North Korea’s nuclear ambitions, cybersecurity threats, and the competition with China in technological innovation. The study acknowledges the advantages of this cooperation—particularly in the areas of security, technology, and energy—but also points out challenges that could threaten its sustainability. These challenges include balancing relations with China, managing domestic political dynamics, and navigating nationalistic tendencies. The article concludes that while the South Korea-U.S.-Japan security cooperation is essential in a multipolar world, its future depends on internal political stability and the ability of leaders to maintain public support for sustained collaboration.

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Japan's current Peace Constitution establishes a self-defense force rather than a formal military, with Article 9 explicitly renouncing war as a means for sovereign states to resolve international disputes. This constitutional framework contrasts with Max Weber's definition of the state as the entity holding the exclusive right to use violence, setting Japan apart from other nations. Within Japan, the political right-wing often characterizes this arrangement as 'abnormal' and advocates for achieving a "normal state" to align the country's functions with the Weberian concept of statehood. Consequently, the term "normalization" is frequently used in English translations to describe this political aspiration. Max Weber, H.H. Gerth, and C. Wright Mills eds. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946): p. 78.

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Barry Eichengreen, "The Age of Hyper-Uncertainty," Project Syndicate (December 14, 2016), <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/age-of-hyper-uncertainty-by-barry-eichengreen-2016-12> (Accessed on January 15, 2025).

Introduction

The world is witnessing two wars. The war in Ukraine, which began with a Russian invasion on February 24, 2022, has been going on for more than two years and is about to enter its third winter, with no sign of resolution. The war between Israel and Hamas, which began with a surprise attack by Hamas on October 7, 2023, has spread beyond the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and into Lebanon. The world has been anxiously watching to see if the armed conflict in the Middle East will escalate into a war between Israel and Iran. The year turned, and on January 15, news finally broke that a ceasefire had been agreed between Israel and Hamas, but it remains to be seen if everything will go as smoothly as agreed.

These two wars are forcing many countries to look at their own problems. This is the case for South Korea, the United States, and Japan. South Korea, which is increasingly engaged in military confrontation with North Korea; the US, which is engaged in a strategic competition with China; and Japan, which is a super aged society but aiming for normalization¹ of the state, cannot help but be baffled by this complex international situation. All three countries want peace and economic prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region, but there is now widespread anxiety and fear that a third war could start somewhere, and if it does, it could be in East Asia.

The year of 2023 was a particularly important year for South Korea, marking the 70th anniversary of the Korean War Armistice Agreement and the 70th anniversary of the ROK-U.S. Alliance, and a number of diplomatic achievements, including President Yoon Suk Yeol's state visit to the US, the restoration of shuttle diplomacy with Japan, and the historic trilateral summit at Camp David. On the other hand, North Korea's Chairman Kim Jong Un met with Russia's President Vladimir Putin to discuss space cooperation at the Vostochny Cosmodrome in September, and China's coast guard hit a Filipino supply boat in the South China Sea in October.

In 2024, tensions continue to escalate. North Korea has now declared the two Koreas to be two hostile nations, and attention is now focused on whether it will take steps such as delineating territory in its constitution and removing language related to unification. As of mid-December, 2024, North Korea has already fired nearly two dozen different types of projectiles, and its bizarre provocations, known as "trash balloon attacks," have disrupted the daily lives of South Korean citizens. North Korea also signed a "Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" with Russia in June and deployed nearly 10,000 of its own soldiers to the country. The conflict between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea has escalated as well, marked by several incidents involving aggressive Chinese maneuvers against Philippine vessels.

The current international situation is so complex, volatile, and unpredictable that anything can happen. In this era of "hyper-uncertainty"², this article considers the significance of the strategic triangle of South Korea, the US, and Japan, and

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John Gerard Ruggie, "International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order," *International Organization* Vol. 36, No. 2 (Spring, 1982): pp. 379-415.

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Chang Jae Biak, "Hegemony and International Political Economic Order: A Critical Evaluation of Hegemonic Stability Theory [In Korean]," *Review of International and Area Studies* Vol. 12, No. 1 (2003): pp. 3-5.

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John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 93, No. 5 (2014): pp. 77-84, 85-89.

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John J. Mearsheimer, "Playing With Fire in Ukraine: The Underappreciated Risks of Catastrophic Escalation," *Foreign Affairs* (August 2022).

whether the trilateral cooperation can be sustainable in the future. This article is an attempt to understand the current international situation and conceptually consider the meaning and sustainability of the South Korea-U.S.-Japan trilateral cooperation in the midst of global structural changes.

This article is organized as follows. The next chapter discusses the questions that the current international situation raises for theories of international relations. Chapter 3 presents some of the most important challenges that South Korea, the US, and Japan face together. Chapter 4 discusses advantages and disadvantages of the South Korea-U.S.-Japan trilateral cooperation in addressing the common challenges presented in Chapter 3. Finally, Chapter 5 summarizes and concludes the article.

Theoretical Discussion on the Current International Situation

How can theoretical frameworks in international relations explain the current international situation?

First, proponents of hegemonic stability theory would attribute the current chaos to the declining hegemonic position of the US and the absence of a new hegemonic power to replace it. Hegemonic stability theory has been in the spotlight since the 1970s, and it is related to the international political and economic situation at the time. After the end of World War II, the absolute influence of the US and the spread of so-called "embedded liberalism"³ stimulated protectionism in many countries and destabilized the international monetary system. The massive deficit in the US balance of payments caused by the Vietnam War, and inflation caused by the increase in the volume of currency to finance the war led to a sharp decline in the value of the dollar, which led some countries to demand gold exchange, and eventually led to the collapse of the Bretton Woods system on August 15, 1971, following Nixon's decision to end gold convertibility. In this situation, the hegemonic stability theory emerged, and since it emerged as the influence of the US declined, it can be seen that it was paradoxically developed as a logic to justify the US hegemony.⁴

From this perspective, the current international situation can also be viewed as a continuation of conflicts in various regions, as China's rise as a G2 and the decline of the U.S. hegemonic position have led to a situation where the US does not have the same influence or leverage as before. For instance, the U.S. Middle East policy seems to have gone downhill since the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan early in the Biden administration. In March 2023, two traditional rivals in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia and Iran, reconciled under Chinese mediation. And just as the US was trying to reconcile Saudi Arabia and Israel, Hamas launched a surprise attack. These events in the Middle East have revealed the decline of the U.S. influence and the rise of China, but even so, neither side has the absolute power to bring stability to the region.

Second, scholars like Mearsheimer, who argues for so-called "offshore balancing", would explain the breakdown in balance of power with the logic of offensive realism. Mearsheimer had already criticized Western expansion when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014.⁵ This time, he made a similar argument when Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine.⁶ The Hamas-Israel war can also

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Marc Lynch, "An Invasion of Gaza Would Be a Disaster for Israel: America Must Prevail on Its Ally to Step Back from the Brink," *Foreign Affairs* (October 2023).

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Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Detroit: Free Press, 2006).

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Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster: 2011).

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Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," President of Russia (July 12, 2021), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181> (Accessed on October 13, 2024).

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Stephen McGlinchey, Sahil Mathur & Amitav Acharya, "Introducing Bipolarity, Tripolarity, Unipolarity, Multipolarity and Multiplexity," (March 27, 2022) <https://www.e-ir.info/2022/03/27/introducing-bipolarity-tripolarity-unipolarity-multipolarity-and-multiplexity-in-international-relations/> (Accessed on October 13, 2024).

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Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Stability of a Bipolar World," *Daedalus* Vol. 93, No. 3 (1964): pp. 881-909.

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Karl W. Deutsch & J. David Singer, "Multipolar Power Systems and International Stability," *World Politics* Vol. 16, No. 3 (1964): pp. 390-406.

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Zbigniew Brzeziński, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1998).

be viewed through the lens of offensive realism. Scholars such as Marc Lynch have called for a more cooled and measured response from the US, noting that if Israel were to advance into Gaza, it would be a disaster for Israel as well.⁷ What these scholars fundamentally worry about is whether the broken balance can be restored. An unbalanced world leads to war.

Third, from a constructivist perspective, it is inevitable to discuss the politics of identity and the resurgence of nationalism. While academic debates between Fukuyama's "the end of history"⁸ and Huntington's "the clash of civilizations"⁹ may seem like old hat, the U.S.-led liberal international order is not working as fully as before, and nationalist far-right sentiment is spreading contagiously amidst the lethargy of the United Nations. Nationalism constructs the identity of nations, which can be a determining factor in the diplomatic relations of nations, as their foreign relationships are shaped by their perceptions of identity. Reading what Putin wrote half a year before he caused the war in Ukraine,¹⁰ it is hard not to get the impression that he sees Ukraine as a land that needs to be recovered from an irredentism perspective, rather than respected as an independent sovereign state. The war may have already been underway at that point.

In short, the current international situation is once again posing fundamental questions to existing theories of international relations. What causes war? Is it the absence of a hegemonic power, the disruption of the balance of power, or a clash of identities? Whatever the answer, it would be fair to say that the current international situation is tremendously complex, highly volatile, and dangerously unpredictable as forementioned.

This unpredictable and complex international situation eventually reveals structural changes in international relations. The world is now characterized by at least three superpowers—the US, China, and Russia—competing with each other, and by fierce strategic competition between states seeking to advance their own interests. It is a multipolar world.

A 'tripolarity' is a type of multipolarity in which power is eventually distributed among two or more power centers,¹¹ and interpretations of the stability of a tripolar system often boil down to the question of whether a multipolar or bipolar system is more peaceful. Waltz, one of the leading realists of the 20th century, argued that a multipolar system is not preferable to a bipolar system because the level of uncertainty is higher in a multipolar system, and the higher the uncertainty, the more likely policy makers are to misjudge.¹² On the other hand, Deutsch and Singer argued for the stability of a multipolar system by saying that, due to the increase in the number of independent actors, the probability of war between states is reduced because the interests of the actors are divided.¹³ For now, Waltz's argument seems more convincing.

At some point, when the balance of power among the multipolar powers is rebalanced, there may be a period of stability and peace again, but in the meantime, as long as countries are realigning with superpowers, instability will continue, and the risk of conflict will be high. We are literally witnessing a reemergence of geopolitics, where the flash points Brzeziński identified¹⁴ are bound to come to the fore.

As a result of this multipolar system, South Korea, the US, and Japan have been working together in the past few years to strengthen trilateral security cooperation. As discussed in more detail later, this inevitably creates a security dilemma. Robert Jervis describes the security dilemma as follows. "The essence of the security dilemma is the inescapable uncertainty about others' intentions. Even benign

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Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* Vol. 30, No. 2 (1978): p. 167.

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Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis [Anniversary Edition]* (New York: Columbia University Press: 2018).

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Leon Hadar, "America's Allies: Free Riding No More?" *The National Interest* (January 18, 2023), <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/america%E2%80%99s-allies-free-riding-no-more-206127> (Accessed on October 13, 2024).

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Shun Ishihara, "'Sensō-no Owari'-ni Dou Muki Auka [In Japanese]," *Gakuzjuto-no Doukou* Vol. 27, No. 12 (December 2022): p. 47.

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Byung-se Yun, "Linchpin or Cornerstone? It Takes Two to Tango!" *The Korea Times* (October 14, 2021), https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2024/10/638_316933.html (Accessed on October 13, 2024).

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Junghoon Lee, "Camp David-eseo Pilyohan Wonjaryeok Hyupjeon Nong-eui [In Korean]," *Hankuk Ilbo* (August 16, 2023), <https://m.hankookilbo.com/News/Read/A2023081410000005747> (Accessed on October 13, 2024); Jungwoo Kim & Byungjun Hwang, "Cho Tae-yong, 'Il-man Kaneung-han Haek-yeollo Nongchuk-Jaecheori, Appuro Puleoya-hal Kwaje' [In Korean]," *TV Chosun News* (August 21, 2023), http://news.tvchosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2023/08/21/2023082190254.html (Accessed on October 13, 2024); *Dong-A Ilbo*, "[Op-ed] Han-Mi Wonjaryeok Hyupjung Kaejung, 'Kyuksang-doen Dongmaeng'-eui Shilleo Boyeo-jul Jipyo [In Korean]," (August 23, 2023), <https://www.donga.com/news/Opinion/article/all/20230822/120815977/1> (Accessed on October 13, 2024).

measures may appear threatening to others, leading to spiraling insecurity."¹⁵ In short, even self-defense actions taken to enhance one's security may be viewed as aggressive by others (adversaries) who are still uncertain of one's intentions, which will have the effect of making them more capable of attacking the one again, thus undermining its security again. Kenneth Waltz has also pointed out that when faced with the prospect of war, states seek to increase their relative power over other states, which has an unintended and unwanted consequence as states strive to secure their own security, namely increasing the insecurity of other states.¹⁶

Common Challenges the Virtual Alliance Faces

As is widely recognized, the structural feature of international relations in East Asia has been centered on bilateral relations between the US and its regional allies, often referred to as "hub and spokes." The ROK-U.S. alliance, the U.S.-Japan alliance, the U.S.-Philippines alliance, and the unique bilateral relationship between the US and Taiwan were central to East Asian international relations. Among these, the ROK-U.S. alliance and the U.S.-Japan alliance were often viewed as competitive.

For example, while the ROK-U.S. alliance operated under the leadership of the combined force and had the experience of shedding blood together in critical phases such as the Vietnam War and the Iraq War, Japan was criticized in the US for many years for its "free-riding."¹⁷ According to its Peace Constitution, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation, so the role of its Self Defense Force has been restricted for exclusively defense purposes (Senshu Bouei; 専守防衛). Accordingly, there were many limitations to conducting operations at the same level as South Korea. In Japan, there was a widespread opinion that it was unfair to criticize Japan for "free-riding" when it was not a normal state because of the Constitution created under the U.S. occupation, especially after the Gulf War. These days, however, it has been pointed out that Japan was indeed a "free rider" during the Cold War era, and that the war in Ukraine was a wake-up call for a country that had been hardly self-conscious about it.¹⁸

In South Korea, meanwhile, the equality of the alliance has been often questioned. For instance, during the Obama years, there were also critics who compared the US calling the U.S.-Japan alliance a "cornerstone" and the ROK-U.S. alliance a "linchpin."¹⁹ Jealousy of the U.S.-Japan alliance was especially pronounced in the area of the peaceful use of nuclear technology. The fact that South Korea has less authority over the nuclear fuel cycle than Japan has been seen as evidence that the US treats the U.S.-Japan alliance differently than the ROK-U.S. alliance. While Japan amended the U.S.-Japan Nuclear Cooperation Agreement in 1988 to authorize uranium enrichment and reprocessing of spent nuclear fuels, South Korea amended the U.S.-ROK Nuclear Cooperation Agreement in 2015, but both uranium enrichment and plutonium extraction are restricted with certain conditions. Many in South Korea's nuclear industry, academia, and foreign policy circles have argued that South Korea should obtain the same level of right from Washington as Japan. These opinions continued to be raised before and after the trilateral summit at Camp David.²⁰

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Lowell Dittmer, "The Strategic Triangle: An Elementary Game-Theoretical Analysis," *World Politics* Vol. 33, No. 4 (1981): pp. 485-515.

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Eunjung Lim, "Could the Trilateral Summit at Camp David Be a Game Changer?" *Global NK* (September 1, 2023), https://www.globalnk.org/publication/view.php?cd=COM000121&ctype=1&s_keyword=&start=30 (Accessed on October 13, 2024).

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Wook Yang, "2023-nyun Bukhan Haek Kaebal Hyunhwang mit Pyungka-Kukbang-lyeok Kanhwa sok-e Jisok-doel 2024-nyun Dobal [In Korean]," *The Asan Institute for Policy Studies Issue Brief* (December 28, 2023), <https://www.asaninst.org/contents/2023%EB%85%84-%EB%B6%81%ED%95%9C-%ED%95%B5%EA%B0%9C%EB%B0%9C-%ED%98%84%ED%99%A9-%EB%B0%8F-%ED%8F%89%EA%B0%80%EA%B5%AD%EB%B0%A9%EB%A0%A5-%EA%B0%95%ED%99%94-%EC%86%8D%EC%97%90-%EC%A7%80%EC%86%8D/> (Accessed on October 13, 2024).

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Doo-hyun Cha, "2023-nyun Bukhan Donghyang Bunseok-Haek-Jipchak-eui Jisok-gwa Kyungro-Jongsok-sung [In Korean]," *The Asan Institute for Policy Studies Issue Brief* (October 13, 2023), <https://www.asaninst.org/contents/2023%EB%85%84-%EB%B6%81%ED%95%9C-%EB%8F%99%ED%96%A5-%EB%B6%84%EC%84%9D-%ED%95%B5%EC%A7%91%EC%B0%A9%EC%9D%98-%EC%A7%80%EC%86%8D%EA%B3%BC-%EA%B2%BD%EB%A1%9C%EC%A2%85%EC%86%8D%EC%84%B1/> (Accessed on October 13, 2024).

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Ki-bum Han, "2024-nyun Sangbanki Bukhan-eui Daenam Dopal Pyungka mit Cheonmang [In Korean]," *The Asan Institute for Policy Studies Issue Brief* (July 24, 2024), <https://www.asaninst.org/contents/2024%EB%85%84-%EC%83%81%EB%B0%98%EA%B8%B0-%EB%B6%81%ED%95%9C%EC%9D%98-%EB%8C%80%EB%82%A8-%EB%8F%84%EB%B0%9C-%ED%8F%89%EA%B0%80-%EB%B0%8F-%EC%A0%84%EB%A7%9D/> (Accessed on October 13, 2024).

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Chainalysis Team, "2022 Biggest Year Ever for Crypto Hacking with \$3.8 Billion Stolen, Primarily from DeFi Protocols and by North Korea-linked Attackers," (February 1, 2023), <https://www.chainalysis.com/blog/2022-biggest-year-ever-for-crypto-hacking/> (Accessed on October 13, 2024).

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Ralph A. Cossa, "US-ROK-Japan: Why a 'Virtual Alliance' Makes Sense," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* Vol. 12, Issue 1 (2000): pp. 67-86.

However, this seemingly "romantic triangle" relationship between South Korea, the US, and Japan is gradually transitioning into a "ménage à trois". Political scientist Lowell Dittmer described "strategic triangles" as follows: (1) the "ménage à trois," in which all three actors are in a friendly relationship, but have an inherently unstable nature; (2) the "romantic triangle," in which one actor is in a friendly relationship with each of the other two, and the other two are hostile; and (3) the "stable marriage," in which two actors are in a friendly relationship, but one actor is in a hostile relationship with both.²¹ There are two main factors that have driven the triangle to this more horizontal and collaborative direction. The external variable is that the threat from North Korea has surpassed a certain level. While South Korea is superior to North Korea in terms of conventional forces, North Korea's nuclear and missile provocations have reached a point where South Korea cannot handle the situation alone. North Korea's rampage has been unstoppable since the so-called "Hanoi No Deal".²²

According to Yang's analysis, North Korea conducted a total of 31 test launches of various strategic weapons in 2023 (as of Dec. 18). Although the number of tests was slightly lower than the 33 tests in 2022, North Korea continued to unveil a wider variety of strategic weapons in 2023. In particular, 2023 is the third year of North Korea's five-year plan to develop its defense capabilities, a time when specific weapons systems should be roughly complete. As such, North Korea has used a mix of fact and exaggeration to show off its progress in perfecting its nuclear arsenal in order to achieve the goals Kim Jong Un set out at the 8th Party Congress.²³ While North Korea seems unlikely to face a regime or systemic crisis in the near term, it is clear that the country is caught in a dilemma of path dependency and limited options, where it is committed to nuclear development without considering other alternatives, Cha argues.²⁴

Concerns that North Korea would not be resilient and would escalate its provocations spread among the leaders of South Korea, the US, and Japan, which eventually led to a consensus among the three countries' leaders on the need for security cooperation. And in 2024, North Korea's provocations continue. In the first half of 2024, North Korea conducted a total of 17 missile/rocket test launches. Han's analysis shows that in 2023, North Korea focused on demonstrating its various missile threat capabilities anytime and anywhere, while in 2024, there were fewer cluster launches and more frequent test launches to develop new weapons.²⁵

Furthermore, North Korea's cyberattacks, in particular, have gotten more sophisticated with each passing year. North Korea has even conducted cyberattacks to steal cryptocurrency and use the money to fund its missile program. According to Chainalysis, North Korea-linked hackers such as those in the cybercriminal syndicate Lazarus Group have been outrageously prolific in recent years. In 2022 alone, they stole an estimated USD 1.7 billion worth of cryptocurrency. While this money is not enough to make or break North Korea's economy, many experts believe it is being used to develop its nuclear and missile programs.²⁶

In short, Seoul, Washington, and Tokyo perceived the North Korean threat to be not only direct, but one that required multilateral cooperation. Cossa has argued that while the "virtual alliance" of South Korea, the US, and Japan may seem unnecessary in the absence of a clear and present threat, it is in the interest of long-term peace and stability.²⁷ The flip side of Cossa's argument is that a clear and present threat could drive cooperation between the three countries. North Korea's advancing nuclear and missile capabilities, as well as its escalating aggression in non-traditional security areas such as cyber security, have acted as powerful

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Seungjoo Lee, "Economic-Security Nexus and the Evolutionary Dynamics of the U.S.-China Strategic Competition [In Korean]," *Korean Journal of International Relations* Vol. 61, No. 3 (2021): pp. 143-144.

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Jeffrey Hornung & Christopher B. Johnstone, "Japan's Strategic Shift Is Significant, But Implementation Hurdles Await," *War on the Rocks* (January 27, 2023), <https://warontherocks.com/2023/01/japans-strategic-shift-is-significant-but-implementation-hurdles-await/> (Accessed on October 13, 2024); Tsuneo Watanabe, "What's New in Japan's Three Strategic Documents," *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (February 13, 2023), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/whats-new-japans-three-strategic-documents> (Accessed on October 13, 2024).

exogenous factors to push for cooperation between South Korea, the US, and Japan.

Arguably, an internal variable that changed the trilateral relationship was the change of government from progressive to conservative in South Korea. The South Korea-Japan relationship had been on a downward spiral since the last year of the Lee Myung Bak administration, it became more serious during the Park Geun Hye-Abe years, and it really took a turn for the worse under the leadership of Moon Jae In and Abe respectively. At the center of the disputes was the South Korean Supreme Court's ruling on victims of forced labor, and the Abe administration sought to damage the South Korean economy by removing the country from Japan's whitelisted countries. This stirred up anti-Japanese sentiment and sparked the "No Japan, No Abe" movement in South Korea, and as public sentiment worsened, the Moon administration seemed to give up on improving relations with Japan.

With the inauguration of the Yoon Suk Yeol government and then-Prime Minister Kishida Fumio's golden years of no elections, the South Korea-Japan relationship took a sharp turn in a positive and future-oriented direction. With diplomatic events such as President Yoon's visit to Tokyo in March 2023, Prime Minister Kishida's visit to Seoul in early May, and the G7 meeting in Hiroshima, it can be said that the so-called "shuttle diplomacy" was restored, leading up to the trilateral summit at Camp David in August. Kishida met with Yoon a whopping 12 times before leaving office in September 2024, which means the two leaders met more than once a month.

Furthermore, while not as clear and direct as the North Korean issue, South Korea, the US, and Japan face the common challenges as follows: First, there is the issue of rebalancing with China. For South Korea and Japan, China is their largest trading partner, surpassing their ally, the US. However, as China's technology grows rapidly, its attractiveness as a production base, an investment outlet, or a market for intermediate goods has been diminishing, and Korean and Japanese companies are increasingly competing with Chinese companies. The Biden administration has sought to reorganize value chains with policies such as reshoring, nearshoring, friendshoring, and allyshoring, and as the US currently conducts, a derisking policy vis-à-vis China. Of course, there is internal pain and criticism, but in an era where economic statecraft is used as a major national security tool,²⁸ South Korea and Japan are trying to keep their pace with the US to some extent.

Second, the outbreak of the war in Ukraine has led to widespread fears of a Taiwan contingency, such as China's siege of the island, especially in Japan rather than South Korea. In some ways, this has worked as an opportunity for conservative politicians in Japan, who pursue normalization of the Japanese state. The Kishida government adopted three new strategic documents at the end of last year: the National Security Strategy (NSS), the National Defense Strategy (NDS), and the Defense Buildup Program. In doing so, Japan has articulated a so-called "counter-attack capability" (Hangeki Noryoku; 反撃能力) and is reportedly planning to spend 5 trillion yen over the next five years to strengthen its long-range strike capabilities, including the purchase of U.S. Tomahawk missiles.²⁹

While South Korea is not as sensitive to a Taiwan contingency as Japan, the issue is increasingly being discussed publicly, including the possibility that U.S. troops could be moved if something were to happen in the Taiwan Strait, which could give a wrong signal to North Korea. Even if nothing happens in Taiwan

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The White House, “Remarks by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan on the Biden-Harris Administration’s National Security Strategy,” (October 12, 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/10/13/remarks-by-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-on-the-biden-harris-administrations-national-security-strategy/> (Accessed on October 13, 2024).

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Emily Harding & Harshana Ghoorhoo, “Seven Critical Technologies for Winning the Next War,” (Washington DC: CSIS, 2023).

necessarily, the maritime security issue is receiving more attention than in the past because the sea lanes from the South China Sea to the East China Sea are a lifeline both for South Korea and Japan, which have no resources inherently and rely on the Middle East for most of their energy imports. Clashes between Israel and Hamas and attacks by Houthi rebels, that have destabilized the Red Sea shipping lanes, have brought renewed attention to maritime security.

Third, a sense of urgency to stay ahead in the race for future technologies is binding the three countries together. Future technologies such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, advanced bioengineering, space-based technology, and green technology are at the core of the U.S.-China strategic rivalry, which has been described as a “small yard and high fence.”³⁰ The idea is that technology export controls to China will be strongly enforced only in areas where they are needed, a metaphor first used by Defense Secretary Robert Gates during the Barack Obama administration. In this race, South Korea and Japan are using a strategy of aligning with the US to avoid being left behind.

In short, the accelerating trilateral cooperation between South Korea, the US, and Japan is partly a result of North Korea’s excessive threats, partly a rebalancing strategy with China, and partly a desire not to be left behind in the race for technological supremacy over future technologies.

Advantages and Disadvantages of the Trilateral Cooperation

Given these common challenges, a trilateral cooperation between South Korea, the US, and Japan makes a lot of sense. In terms of the nuclear and missile threats from North Korea alone, as North Korea’s nuclear capabilities have advanced and its missile range has diversified, coordinating the reconnaissance assets and response capabilities of the three countries would be highly positive to the effective operation of extended deterrence. It is also expected to increase the initial response capability by linking reconnaissance capabilities among the three countries. In addition, continuing joint exercises and planning scenario-specific responses in the event of a similar incident in the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, or the East China Sea is beneficial to regional stability as well as maritime and economic security of South Korea and Japan.

Beyond traditional security challenges, there are many areas in which the three countries can cooperate. At the Camp David summit, the leaders also agreed to expand joint research and people-to-people exchanges in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields, which, as mentioned in the previous chapter, is crucial to staying ahead of the curve in the race for key technologies of the future.

In April 2023, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a Washington-based think tank, released a report titled “Seven Critical Technologies for Winning the Next War,” which identified “sprint technologies” to which the US should devote significant resources and effort: (1) Secure and Redundant Communications, (2) Quantum Technology, and (3) Bioengineering, while ‘follow technologies’ that should further refine ongoing efforts in the private sector include (4) Space-Based Technology, (5) High-Performance Batteries, (6) Artificial Intelligence/Machine Learning, and (7) Robotics.³¹

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In Tae Yoo, "Chapter 2—Hanmi Cheomdan Kisul Hymlyeok [In Korean]," Sangbae Kim ed., *Hanmi Dongmaeng-eui Digital Jeonhwan* (Seoul: Hanul, 2022), pp. 45-46.

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Statista, "Leading Gas Exporting Countries in 2022, By Export Type," (August 25, 2023), <https://www.statista.com/statistics/217856/leading-gas-exporters-worldwide/> (Accessed on October 13, 2024).

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World Nuclear Association, "Nuclear Power in the World Today (Updated September 11, 2024)," <https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/current-and-future-generation/nuclear-power-in-the-world-today.aspx> (Accessed on October 13, 2024).

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For information on reactors being built in emerging countries, see the links below. World Nuclear Association, "Emerging Nuclear Energy Countries (Updated April 26, 2024)," <https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/others/emerging-nuclear-energy-countries.aspx> (Accessed on October 13, 2024).

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"From a non-proliferation standpoint, uranium enrichment is a sensitive technology needing to be subject to tight international control." For information on the ability of major companies to enrich uranium, see the link below. World Nuclear Association, "Uranium Enrichment (Updated October 11, 2022)," <https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/nuclear-fuel-cycle/conversion-enrichment-and-fabrication/uranium-enrichment.aspx> (Accessed on October 13, 2024).

Current U.S. foreign policy is focused on building a coalition of nations with key technologies or resources in these future key technology areas, and the proposal for a "Fab 4" alliance (also known as "Chip 4") of the US, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan can be seen as part of a larger, long-term effort to impose collective sanctions aimed at damaging China's semiconductor production capabilities.³² As we enter the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, many of the key technologies of the future will be dual-use, so creating alliances/coalitions in the technology fields may have similar implications to creating military alliances in the traditional sense.

The trilateral cooperation can be further synergized by focusing on the common challenges faced by South Korea and Japan. Energy is one of the most serious of these common challenges, and the US has the capacity to complement their efforts. In the field of natural gas, for example, South Korea and Japan are among the world's largest LNG importers, and the US has surpassed Russia as the world's largest gas exporter since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine.³³ While the use of fossil fuels must be reduced to combat the climate crisis, gas is considered a relatively clean energy source that can serve as a bridge.

The same is true for nuclear power. While the nuclear industry in the US and Japan shrank after the Three Mile Island accident and the Fukushima accident, respectively, South Korea has 26 operable reactors, and as of September 2024, it was ranked fifth in the world for nuclear energy generation, behind the US, China, France, and Russia.³⁴ However, with Russia being already the most outstanding player in the new nuclear power plant construction market in emerging economies, the U.S. influence has been significantly weakened. While South Korea has exported four APR-1400s to the United Arab Emirates, Poland has selected the US to build its first nuclear power plant, and the Czech Republic has selected South Korea as the preferred bidder for a new nuclear power plant construction, the presence of Russia and China in emerging markets is much greater.³⁵

The situation is even worse in the uranium enrichment and nuclear fuel supply markets. Russia's Rosatom is already the dominant player in this field, and China's capabilities are growing rapidly. The U.S. enrichment capability has lost its presence in the global market.³⁶ Japan is the only non-nuclear weapon state that can enrich and reprocess for commercial purposes. If the three countries can work together and complement each other to create a balance to the Russian and Chinese dominance, it will ultimately benefit the existing nonproliferation regime as well.

In the field of new energy such as hydrogen, for another instance, the U.S. gas-related infrastructure and favorable climatic and geological conditions, combined with the technological capabilities of South Korea and Japan, could create a stable supply chain. In a nutshell, the South Korea-U.S.-Japan trilateral cooperation on energy and green technology can have great advantages.

While there are complementary and synergistic aspects of cooperation between the three countries, there are also concerns about how sustainable this trilateral cooperation will be. Especially when it comes to China, there are several issues to consider. While it is in the direct interest of all three countries to develop a coordinated response in the event of a Taiwan contingency, and to stabilize sea lanes in the South China Sea and the East China Sea, it is also in their national interests not to cross the so-called "red line", not to aggravate Beijing unnecessarily, and not to provide legitimacy to Beijing to attack Taiwan. In other words, trilateral security cooperation should not trigger the kind of security dilemmas discussed in Chapter 2 in the Taiwan Strait.

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Francis Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014): pp. 487-492.

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Gregory Henderson, *Korea: The Politics of the Vortex* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1968).

When it comes to technological competition, all three countries have a desire of not being left behind in the race. South Korea and Japan, wary of China's frightening growth, are sympathetic to the US keeping China in check, but on the other hand, they also worry that China will eventually break away from the supply chain and develop its own technology. If China no longer needs the technology of South Korea, the US, and Japan, their markets will be smaller.

Therefore, all three countries need to be cautious about becoming more adversarial with China than necessary or engaging in overly aggressive behavior. The November 15 meeting between President Biden and President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in San Francisco in 2023 was a positive sign for South Korea and Japan, as it created a somewhat calmer atmosphere and confirmed that neither country wants to see their rivalry spiral into catastrophe.

While the "ménage à trois" relationship tends to be unstable by its nature, the external circumstances mentioned above suggest that South Korea, the US, and Japan have more to gain from working together than they would otherwise. In the end, the sustainability of this trilateral cooperation depends more on internal factors than external ones. Eventually, the trilateral cooperation between South Korea, the US, and Japan, which had been developing smoothly for less than two years, has been shaken up by domestic politics.

In South Korea's general election held in April 2024, the ruling People's Power Party won only 108 out of 300 seats, while the opposition Democratic Party of Korea won 175 seats and retained its majority. The Democratic Party, which had become the absolute majority in South Korea's National Assembly, has pressured the administration through various means, and President Yoon has fought back with his veto power. The vetocracy that Fukuyama describes³⁷ dragged on and on, culminating in President Yoon's December 3 announcement of emergency martial law. South Korea has been stuck in what Henderson calls a "vortex of politics."³⁸

In Japan, Prime Minister Kishida was also politically embarrassed by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)'s campaign finance scandal that erupted in late 2023, and ultimately ended his tenure as prime minister by withdrawing from the LDP presidential election in September 2024. Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru, who was elected to succeed Kishida, dissolved the House of Representatives after only eight days in office, the shortest period of time in Japan's postwar history. However, in the October 27 House of Representatives election, the LDP failed to win a majority of seats, even with its coalition partner Komeito, and was reduced to a minority party. In the prime ministerial nomination election, he was re-nominated as prime minister in a runoff election, but it is unclear whether the LDP-Komeito coalition will be able to maintain the momentum of trilateral cooperation between South Korea, the US, and Japan.

The situation in the US is even more challenging. In the end, with Trump's reelection, there is much skepticism about whether he will continue to pursue the South Korea-U.S.-Japan trilateral cooperation, as he is expected to restructure alliances and focus on bilateral rather than multilateral relationships. However, as the second Trump administration is expected to continue its hardline stance against China, the US will not only need but also demand the cooperation of the two economic powerhouses in East Asia, South Korea and Japan. The problem is that it is highly unpredictable what Trump will demand from South Korea and Japan, respectively.

The situation in neighboring countries is also complicated. In the Taiwanese presidential election held in January 2024, the Democratic Progressive Party's Lai

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Reuters, "‘Impossible’ for People’s Republic of China to Be Our Motherland, Taiwan President Says," (October 5, 2024), <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/impossible-peoples-republic-china-be-our-motherland-taiwan-president-says-2024-10-05/> (Accessed on October 13, 2024).

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Robert D. Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games," *International Organization* Vol. 42, No. 3 (Summer, 1988): pp. 427-460.

Ching-te won and the Lai administration is taking a clearer sense of Taiwanese identity. On October 5, speaking at a concert ahead of Taiwan’s national day celebrations on October 10, President Lai noted that the People’s Republic of China had celebrated its 75th anniversary on October 1, and in a few days it would be the Republic of China’s 113th birthday. Lai made headlines when he said, "How can the People’s Republic of China, which is only 75 years old, be the motherland of the Republic of China?"³⁹ While such statements emphasizing Taiwan’s authenticity may help boost Taiwanese pride, they also risk provoking a nervous reaction from Beijing and escalating tensions on the cross-Strait issue.

Meanwhile, war-mongering President Putin was re-elected in the Russian presidential election held in March 2024 with nearly 90% of the vote. With Ukraine’s advances into Russia’s mainland, Kursk, and a mixed front, the world’s attention now turns to Washington. Trump has boasted that he could end the war in 24 hours during his presidential campaign, but it remains to be seen whether Russia or Ukraine would be receptive to his offer.

Robert Putnam’s two-level game framework highlights the dual pressures leaders face when they deal with foreign affairs.⁴⁰ At the international level (Level I), they must negotiate agreements that address shared strategic challenges, such as North Korea’s nuclear ambitions and China’s increasingly coercive behaviors in the region for the case of the South Korea-U.S.-Japan trilateral cooperation. Simultaneously, at the domestic level (Level II), they must secure support from their own citizens, legislators, and interest groups, often navigating historical grievances, nationalist sentiments, and institutional constraints. The sustainability of the trilateral cooperation between South Korea, the US, and Japan relies on the ability to manage these interdependent pressures, aligning domestic win-sets with international agreements.

Conclusion

This article argues that two wars and a complicating international situation have created a complex crisis that cannot be fully explained by existing theories of international relations. The ongoing realignment of power is a complex set of factors that will continue to play out for the foreseeable future. Rather than one country gaining absolute dominance in all areas, I expect to see a complex situation where multiple networks have advantages and disadvantages in different areas. Also, it is possible to see multiple minilateralist approaches within and between networks. Therefore, I would like to reiterate that it is necessary to look at the ongoing transformation of global order from a multifaceted and layered perspective, rather than framing it as a zero-sum game between ideologically different camps.

From this perspective, the trilateral cooperation between South Korea, the US, and Japan makes a lot of sense. Threatening behaviors such as North Korea’s advancing nuclear and missile capabilities and sophisticated cyberattacks can be far more effectively deterred and countermeasured, when dealt with by multilateral cooperation than by individual responses. In addition, all three countries are facing fierce competition with China in the field of future technologies, so increasing cooperation in complementary areas makes sense in terms of seeking balance.

Therefore, depending on the agenda, the trilateral cooperation may involve other partner countries, such as Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, or the Philippines.

On the other hand, the article also emphasizes that the cooperation between the three countries should not push China too far or go beyond a certain line from a perspective of offensive realism. The return of a honeymoon period with China is unlikely to happen anytime soon for any of the three countries, but if the duality of competition and cooperation can be managed well, major conflicts can be avoided in this region.

Finally, the article points out that rather internal factors can prevent trilateral cooperation. The reemergence of nationalist sentiments or populists who prioritize their country's interests more than anything else could undo the efforts made so far. The sustainability of trilateral cooperation, therefore, depends on the dynamics of the "two-level game". Leaders who wish to continue trilateral cooperation need to focus on developing policies that can maximize benefits that their citizens can actually feel from the trilateral cooperation, and accelerate efforts to achieve public supports. However, the return of Trump and the political instability of Yoon and Ishiba are ultimately calling into question the sustainability of the trilateral cooperation. It will be academically intriguing to see if the framework of trilateral cooperation between South Korea, the US, and Japan can be maintained and developed even after 2025, overcoming the challenges of domestic politics.

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