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THE PENINSULA

South Korea-Japan Relations: Assessing the Longevity of the Spirit of Camp David

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US-South Korea-Japan trilateral cooperation has been on an upswing since the [Spirit of Camp David joint statement](#), published after US President Joe Biden hosted South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio at the eponymous presidential retreat in August 2023. “We commit to expand our cooperation trilaterally and raise our shared ambition to a new horizon, across domains and across the Indo-Pacific and beyond,” the leaders said.

In the last year, Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo have embarked on institutionalizing consultations, increasing coordination on regional and international challenges, and building people-to-people relations. While political leaders should be proud of this progress, lingering resentment from Imperial Japan’s colonization of the Korean Peninsula means the Korea-Japan leg of the triangle remains tenuous.

Trilateral Security Cooperation under the Spirit of Camp David

The creation of a new trilateral defense framework is the latest development emerging from the Camp David summit. In late July, US Secretary Lloyd Austin met with the then South Korean Minister of National Defense Shin Won-sik (who today was [appointed](#) as President Yoon’s National Security Advisor) and Japanese Minister of Defense Kihara Minoru in Japan for the “[Trilateral Ministerial Meeting](#)” (TMM), during which they discussed various regional security challenges. After the meeting, the defense ministers

announced the signing of a “Memorandum of Cooperation on the Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework.” According to their [joint statement](#), the framework calls for “senior-level policy consultations, information sharing, trilateral exercises, and defense exchange cooperation” in order to formalize defense coordination between the three countries. South Korea will host the next TMM, as the ministers also agreed to rotate hosting duties.

In addition to announcing the new trilateral framework, the defense ministers praised the results of the first trilateral “Freedom Edge” exercise. Held in late June, the three-day exercise “expresses the will of Japan, ROK, and U.S. to promote trilateral interoperability and protect freedom for peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific, including the Korean Peninsula,” according to the [US Indo-Pacific Command](#) (INDOPACOM). Although the three countries have conducted combined maritime and aerial exercises before, Freedom Edge was the first trilateral exercise held [across multiple domains](#), including air (ballistic missile defense and air defense), maritime (search-and-rescue and maritime interdiction), underwater (anti-submarine warfare), and cyber (defensive cyber training). [Reportedly](#), the exercise was held in the waters off South Korea’s Jeju Island and combined the names of the annual bilateral exercises Washington holds with Seoul and Tokyo, “[Freedom Shield](#)” and “[Keen Edge](#),” respectively. Building on the [December 2023 activation](#) of a data-sharing mechanism to exchange real-time missile warning data to detect and assess North Korean ballistic missiles, Freedom Edge adds a new layer of trilateral defense and military cooperation, upon which the three countries have committed to expand.

South Korea and Japan are also moving past the 2018 radar lock-on incident, in which a South Korean ship directed its fire-control radar on a Japanese patrol airplane and precipitated a breakdown in defense cooperation. The then Defense Minister Shin and his Japanese counterpart met on the sidelines of the recent Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore and essentially [agreed to disagree](#) on the specifics of what happened and pledged to develop procedures that comply with the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea. The ministers said in [a joint statement](#) that security cooperation is “beneficial for both countries” and “essential not only for deterring North Korean threats, but also for realizing a free and open Indo-Pacific.” As a result, they agreed to resume high-level consultations and exchanges between their defense forces. While acknowledging the agreement was not perfect, a Japanese defense official [said](#) Japan and South Korea “should not be trapped in the past” and that the two countries “have no choice but to deepen our understanding and trust in the other side, step by step.”

Differences in South Korean and Japanese Public Opinion

It is less clear, however, whether the Japanese and South Korean publics share a similar confluence of views. In May, a [public opinion survey](#) conducted jointly by the *Yomiuri Shimbun* and *Hankook Ilbo* found that 86 percent of Japanese respondents and 79 percent of Korean respondents supported the strengthening of trilateral relations. The survey also found that 50 percent of Japanese respondents and 42 percent of Korean respondents said the bilateral Korea-Japan relationship was good. While the Japanese sentiment was higher than it was last year, the Korean response decreased by one point. The rebound in perception tracks with [surveys](#) released earlier this year, which found [young people](#) are leading the way into an era of good feelings between South Korea and Japan. But the shadow cast by the history of Imperial Japan continues to cloud bilateral relations.

In the Hankook-Yomiuri survey, the Korean side was evenly split when asked if bilateral Korea-Japan relations could advance despite historical disagreements. Meanwhile, 57 percent of Japanese respondents believed it could. But when Japan-based Genron NPO asked if the bilateral relationship would get better, Korean and Japanese respondents diverged. Although 28.8 percent of Korean respondents said they expected the bilateral relationship to get better, 18.2 percent said that they expected it would get worse. On the other hand, 38.5 percent of Japanese respondents said the relationship would get better, while only 7.8 percent said it would get worse. One reason for the Korean side's wariness may be suspicion due to the legacy of Japanese imperialism.

When asked why they had a poor impression of Japan, the most cited reason (65.4 percent) was the lack of an apology from Japan for its colonization of the Korean Peninsula. Furthermore, almost a third of Korean respondents identified Japan as a possible security threat, right behind China and North Korea. These findings suggest President Yoon's efforts to revive bilateral relations may not outlive his administration. A *Yomiuri Shimbun* editorial noted that Korean courts continue to issue judicial rulings against Japan and that Korean progressives have seen electoral success in the National Assembly while remaining critical of the Yoon government. "If this situation continues, Japanese sentiment toward South Korea could deteriorate again," the paper said.

As the weakest leg of the US-South Korea-Japan trilateral, Seoul and Tokyo should take steps to build mutual societal trust. Fortunately, they have already taken some steps, holding the first trilateral youth forum in Busan this July. But there is still work that can be done by both sides.

For the Japanese people, there needs to be greater awareness of Imperial Japan's legacy. For example, the Japanese government approved a middle school history textbook that downplayed atrocities in occupied Korea. As South Korean Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lim Soo-suk said in an April statement, the approval of such textbooks "not only runs counter to the trend of improving bilateral relations between Korea and Japan but also is an irresponsible act of allowing the provision of education of distorted historical perspectives to the young generation." While it is true that Japan has made efforts, such as the Maruyama and Kono statements, they are undermined when the Japanese government approves whitewashed history textbooks or resists the use of "forced labor" to describe the work done by Koreans on Sado Island.

On the Korean side of the ledger, people should become acquainted with Japan as it is and not as it used to be. In addition to viewing Japan as a security threat, Genron NPO found that 45.4 percent of Korean respondents described Japan as "militaristic," and only 27.9 percent said it was "democratic." While there are some lines of continuity between contemporary Japan and its imperial predecessor, the degree of continuity is often distorted and highly politicized in South Korean domestic politics. Given the persistence and prevalence of such suspicions among the Korean public, it is not difficult to see how cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo could face future headwinds.

Moving Trilateral Cooperation Forward

At Camp David, President Biden was right to commend President Yoon and Prime Minister Kishida for their efforts to improve bilateral relations. Such efforts have enabled the strong level of trilateral coordination needed to deal with shared threats posed by North Korea and address concerns over China's actions. Yet despite convergence between government

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officials, the South Korean and Japanese publics still show critical differences. Japan needs to better address the memories of its occupation, while Koreans need to build confidence and trust in dealing with their Japanese counterparts. After the release of the Camp David statement last year, Biden officials were at pains to emphasize their desire to lock in progress to overcome domestic political changes in Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo. But the new normal remains tenuous. More work must be done.

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