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Legislative Diplomacy Represents a New Frontier of US-South

Korea-Japan Trilateral Cooperation

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On September 10, 2024, the US House of Representatives passed a bipartisan [resolution](#) recognizing the importance of trilateral cooperation among the United States, South Korea, and Japan. The resolution commended recent developments between the three countries and new initiatives that have expanded the trilateral relationship beyond traditional security cooperation, including seizing opportunities in new technological frontiers and fostering grassroots people-to-people engagement. The resolution also highlighted the leadership of South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio in improving bilateral relations, while encouraging further trilateral collaboration across diplomatic, economic, security, and informational domains.

Indeed, the impressive progress made in the year since the Camp David Summit has seen executive-led breakthroughs that have opened a window of opportunity for deeper trilateral cooperation. A missing link, however, is legislative cooperation that can withstand changes in government and supplement executive-led initiatives through budgetary and other means of support unique to the legislative branch. Now is the time for legislators to step up and build the enduring structures to keep that window open. A stronger relationship between the US, South Korean, and Japanese legislatures will ensure that this critical framework survives and prospers in an era of ever-shifting geopolitics.

Domestic Politics and Looming Leadership Changes

Despite a flurry of meetings and agreements following the Camp David Summit, the foundation of the trilateral framework is shakier than it appears. In South Korea, the political divide over trilateral diplomatic engagement remains deep. In Japan, skepticism remains high within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party over Seoul's reliability, particularly concerning commitments to address longstanding disputes. Public opinion also reflects this discord, with recent polls revealing that over half of South Koreans and Japanese still distrust each other as foreign policy counterparts, with only about a third approving the thaw in bilateral relations under the Yoon and Kishida administrations.

Compounding these challenges are impending leadership transitions. Both President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida have decided not to seek re-election, and President Yoon faces headwinds amid continued domestic unpopularity with approval under 30 percent. The prospect of a return to the White House by former President Donald Trump and his transactional views on alliance relationships adds further volatility.

These domestic and political pitfalls are why trilateral cooperation needs a more robust, institutionalized framework—one that can withstand leadership changes and shifting political winds. This is where legislative diplomacy can step in.

Current Legislative Exchanges: Bilateral and Fragmented

While bilateral legislative exchanges exist, a comprehensive trilateral framework remains conspicuously absent. The current landscape of legislative diplomacy in this triangle is fragmented and largely bilateral in nature.

Between the three countries, high-profile visits by politicians have long been the primary channel of dialogue. Notable examples include Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to both countries in 2022, Senator Jon Ossoff's engagements with Korea, Senator Bill Hagerty's visits to Japan, and former Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide's visit to Korea.

Additionally, congressional study groups on Korea and Japan and the US Senate Korea Caucus have served as the backbone of legislative exchanges. For instance, the Congressional Study Group on Japan—with around 90 House and Senate members—and mutual delegation visits by Congressional and Japanese Diet members serve as the primary vehicles for engagement between legislators. Meanwhile, South Korea and Japan have relied on the 50-year-old Japan-Korea Parliamentarians' Union as their main avenue for dialogue, with more than 150 South Korean National Assembly members and 300 Diet members.

Despite this current array of bilateral arrangements, the US-Japan-South Korea Legislative Exchange Program, originally established by George Washington University in 1987 and subsequently managed by the Mansfield Foundation under the Foley Legislative Exchange Program, once played a pivotal role in fostering trilateral cooperation among the three nations. However, this initiative was suspended in 2022, leaving a significant gap in legislative diplomacy and inter-parliamentary dialogue due to budgetary constraints.

The existing mechanisms, while valuable, fall short of providing the comprehensive, trilateral engagement needed to address the complex challenges facing the relationship.

Toward a Trilateral Legislative Dialogue

A full-fledged trilateral legislative dialogue should include a dedicated, rotating secretariat to facilitate ongoing communication and collaboration among the three nations' legislative branches. This institution could serve as the backbone for a multifaceted dialogue structure, culminating in an annual summit that convenes speakers and party leaders from all three nations.

Under the institutionalized secretariat should be sector-specific committees, composed of representatives from each legislature's standing committees. Committees should convene frequent, ad hoc meetings—both in-person and virtually—mirroring the working-level interactions already established among the three governments. This legislative cooperation mechanism should actively engage the private sector, including corporations, think tanks, and diplomatic missions, including them in dialogue as expert panelists providing insights and diverse perspectives to the legislative process.

Beyond the legislators themselves, this structure would foster consistent engagement among their legislative aides and staff through joint training programs and regular consultations. These interactions, often overlooked in traditional diplomatic frameworks, are crucial for building the mutual understanding and shared knowledge base necessary for effective trilateral cooperation, enabling more agile and coordinated policy responses, and transcending the limitations of formal, high-level diplomatic channels.

This institutionalized trilateral legislative dialogue could perform several vital functions.

First, the new dialogue could facilitate mutual learning about the legislative and political processes of partner countries. Lawmakers could explain the rationale behind key domestic legislation and evaluate the implications for trilateral relations, helping counterparts better coordinate their domestic policies in preparation.

The importance of legislative communication was highlighted in 2022 when the announcement of the US Inflation Reduction Act triggered concern among Korean and Japanese legislators. Many worried about its potential impact on domestic industries, including automotive, telecommunications, and batteries, with some questioning Washington's commitment to coordinate with allies. Similarly, when Seoul pursued reforms targeting foreign tech giants, it elicited significant pushback from US business leaders and lawmakers, underscoring the potential for misalignment even among close partners.

Through this dialogue, such impactful legislation would be communicated more effectively, reducing feelings of betrayal or abruptness that might lead to political tension. While embassy-based legislative liaisons serve a valuable role, direct legislator-to-legislator channels offer distinct advantages, including streamlining information dissemination and enabling more nuanced articulation of policy rationales to domestic constituencies and interest groups.

Second, the new dialogue would help deepen information exchanges on crucial trilateral issues, especially in areas where legislative coordination is desired. Policy coordination on supply chain resilience, critical minerals, and AI governance are just some key domains where similar legislation is submitted in all three legislatures and could greatly augment governmental efforts. Both Seoul and Tokyo have been working on legislation related to these issues, and careful coordination by the three legislative bodies would most optimally lead to policies that can fulfill shared objectives.

Third, this framework would amplify constituent voices, integrating domestic concerns into trilateral dialogues and communicating the value of cooperation to the public. Despite progress, recent polls indicate that there is still public skepticism in Seoul and Tokyo about deepening trilateral ties. With a bigger presence in the trilateral framework, legislators can address these apprehensions by transparently conveying both the benefits and challenges of closer cooperation, showcasing how they are working with partners to deliver tangible results even at the sub-national level. Given their direct connection to voters, legislators are uniquely positioned to lead this effort and bridge the gap between international collaboration and domestic priorities.

Fourth, establishing a trilateral legislative dialogue among legislators will help insulate the trilateral relationship from political turmoil or a souring of relations in one leg of the trilateral. While governments may feel pressured to distance themselves during times of diplomatic trouble, the hurdle for legislators—who are not beholden to the same pressure of diplomatic posturing—is significantly lower in times of normalcy (the exception being election years). Legislators also have the benefit of potentially working on this specific bilateral and trilateral relationship over the course of their careers, ideally enabling them to foster legislator-to-legislator relations more effectively than at the executive level.

Overcoming Challenges: The Path Forward

Of course, securing a new trilateral legislative dialogue will not materialize without its challenges. For starters, it seems obvious that the new mechanism must ensure active participation on both sides of the political spectrum in all three countries—something that the existing bilateral mechanisms have so far failed to do. Legislators may also face different pressures compared to the government, be it interest groups or electoral incentives, to play up the negative aspects of the trilateral relationship.

Yet, these hurdles are far outweighed by the potential benefits, and a trilateral legislative dialogue could finally lay the groundwork to weather political transitions, confront shared challenges, and seize emerging opportunities in the Indo-Pacific region. The recent House resolution is a strong signal of legislative commitment. Now, policymakers from the three countries should work to establish a comprehensive framework for ongoing dialogue. Ensuring bipartisan participation will be challenging, but striving for this ideal will be the key to the framework's success.

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