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THE PENINSULA

[2024 in Review] The Consolidation of Trilateral Cooperation – and its Uncertain Future

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The Yoon Suk-yeol administration's signal foreign policy achievement is arguably the forging of trilateral security cooperation between the Republic of Korea (ROK), Japan and the United States. During the past year, the leaders of all three nations have moved unusually quickly to institutionalize the structure of cooperation.

The desire to consolidate progress seems to have been driven by a sense of urgency as the three leaders who met at Camp David in August 2023 faced the possible end to their administrations. And the results of the US election, the shift in power in Japan, and the turbulence in South Korea following President Yoon's martial law declaration and now impeachment justifies concerns about the potential endurance of this breakthrough in relations.

In an effort to maintain momentum during the last year, the defense ministers of the three countries met in Singapore on June 2 to discuss regional security and announced plans to hold a new and unprecedented multi-domain trilateral military exercise, Freedom Edge. The first iteration of the exercise took place later that month, involving naval vessels and aircraft and focusing on ballistic missile defense, anti-submarine warfare, maritime interdiction and cyber defense training.

During the same early June meeting, the defense chiefs responded forcefully to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) heightened missile testing and the intensification of military cooperation between the DPRK and Russia. Such concerns were soon reinforced when Russian leader Vladimir Putin's mid-June visit to Pyongyang yielded a mutual security treaty between Russia and North Korea, going beyond any previous commitment.

In late July, the three defense ministers met again, in Tokyo, and **expressed** "grave concern" over increased Russia-North Korea ties. And, in an ongoing effort to institutionalize senior-level consultations, information sharing, trilateral exercises and other forms of defense cooperation, the defense authorities established a new Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework. A second **round** of the Freedom Edge exercise took place in mid-November, involving ships and advanced aircraft from all three countries.

More recently on November 15, Presidents Yoon and Biden and newly installed Japanese Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru met on the sidelines of the APEC leaders meeting in Peru. In addition to responding toughly to North Korea's dispatch of troops to Russia for combat against Ukraine, the three leaders announced the creation of a new permanent Trilateral Coordinating Secretariat to institutionalize trilateral cooperation. "During the past 15 months," their joint statement declared, "we have constructed a trilateral partnership that is built to last." The statement also outlined joint views and cooperation in a wide range of areas including technology, humanitarian assistance, and bolstering of ties with the Philippines.

Unsurprisingly, these developments drew the attention, and the ire, of the North Korean regime. The Korea Central News Agency (KCNA), the DPRK's state-run news agency, released a lengthy November 19 commentary **denouncing** the steps toward "three-party cooperation" as a preparation for war and nuclear confrontation that will "only bring the DPRK's strong and regular retaliatory actions."

In typical sardonic fashion, the commentary sneered that of the three leaders who had met in Camp David, "one has already been ousted from his premiership and another one will soon leave the Oval Office and the last one is the verge of being impeached, for being forsaken by the public." The prediction of political turmoil in South Korea proved to be prescient. And a potential change of government in Seoul could challenge the endurance of the institutions of trilateral security cooperation so assiduously built in 2024.

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