

# Value of Trilateral Cooperation for the Indo-Pacific Strategy & the Ghost of History: The Case of US-Japan-South Korea Alliance

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## Abstract

The trilateral alliance of America, Japan and South Korea has long been desired by Washington to become the backbone of the US alliance system in Asia due to similar interests and values, especially in the face of common threats. Originally fostered with the aim to counter North Korea and later institutionalized in 1999, the US-Japan-South Korea trilateral alliance has been successful in establishing a coordinated mechanism for cooperation. However, in 2017 when US President Trump pushed ahead with FOIP, the opposing response by Japan and South Korea exposed perception gaps in the trilateral grouping. Even as Japan welcomed this development, South Korea's hesitation towards FOIP highlighted the dilemma of supporting US initiatives without being entangled in the US-China power struggle. Furthermore, FOIP's Japanese origins have been associated with South Korea's slow embrace of the new strategic concept. At the same time, waning Japan-South Korea relations due to debates over historical narratives have weakened the post-Cold War bonhomie developed by the neighbouring states. This paper assesses the American rationale for attaching importance to the trilateral alliance and its position within the Indo-Pacific construct. Most importantly, the paper addresses the evolution of the triad amidst evolving regional geopolitics.

**Key words:** US-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Alliance; Free & Open Indo Pacific; Japan-South Korea Relations

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## Introduction

The US-Japan-South Korea trilateral alliance stems from the bilateral ties fostered by the US with each of these countries in the years following World War II. American bilateral interactions were the basis for the hub-and-spoke alliance network, or *San Francisco system*, which helped the US play an instrumental role in constructing modern-day Asian regional security architecture. During the Cold War, the US cultivated tightly-knit bilateral ties with specific states ("spokes") and acted as the central hub with little to no interaction between these spokes (Cha 2016). At the time, America was considering the idea of an Asian organization that would be established on the principle of collective security in the backdrop of the intensifying ideological war of influence with USSR in the Asian theatre. However, the deep mistrust and fear towards Japan and the rise of nationalism within the region resisted these plans (Snyder 2007). These hub & spoke ties were asymmetric, with America holding far greater influence over the states. Japan and South Korea remained two important states in this

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bilateral US alliance network; however, their relations with one another were somewhat strained, even as they normalised relations in 1965. America acted as the central hub, whereas the two Asian countries (Japan and South Korea) had limited connection with each other, creating an unofficial alliance network; a stark contrast to the US-led alliance system existing in Europe (NATO) (Cha 2016).

The hub and spoke alliance system gave Japan and South Korea two guarantees: US commitment to defend these states through mutual security treaties; and, their addition to the US nuclear umbrella (i.e. American willingness to use nuclear weapons to protect these allies) (Roehrig 2007). Treaties signed in 1951 and 1953, with Japan and South Korea respectively, led to America gaining forward base access in the Pacific as America stationed troops in these states. The close nature of these security ties has not only led to providing bases to the American troops, but also intelligence sharing, closer defense cooperation, logistics support and assistance to US led defense initiatives. One of the important Cold War characteristics in East Asia was the ideological confrontation between the two triangles (i.e., Washington DC-Tokyo-Seoul and Moscow-Pyongyang-Beijing). Over the years, the convergence of values like democracy and freedom made the US-Japan-South Korea triad an important pillar of East Asian security (Jo and Mo 2010).

As the world transitioned towards a post-Cold War era, deriving a new meaning and scope for the US alliance structure in Asia became a point of focus for various administrations. The region moved towards greater autonomy, economic prosperity, democratisation and interdependence. As the post-Cold War years witnessed an era which was relatively devoid of superpowers competing for greater influence, attention towards security ties relaxed for a while. Particularly, with the commencement of the dot com revolution and globalisation, Asia geared its focus towards strengthening its economic potential. However, North Korea's string of missile tests in 1993-1994 and the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1995-1996 brought a renewed sense of realism regarding the emerging security challenges facing the region. Especially, the nuclear threat unfolding on the Korean peninsula propelled the three countries to not only strengthen their security ties, but also institutionalise them, and creating better negotiating mechanism for coordinating respective strategies (US Department of State).

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The 1994 Defense Trilateral Talks (until 2002) involved mid-level ministers from these three countries with the nuclear threat as the main agenda. But it was the 1999 Trilateral Coordination & Oversight Group (TCOG) that formally established a diplomatic channel for reviewing the nuclear situation of DPRK and reaffirmed the importance of coordination between the three countries and upholding Agreed Framework between US and DPRK of 1994 (US National Archives and Records Administration). The TCOG policy was actively led by the US as a means to involve Japan and South Korea in key regional initiatives. The trilateral relationship began to be viewed as a “virtual alliance” that would rely more on the bilateral partnerships with US, in the absence of a “formal official trilateral security alliance,” and would be instrumental in maintaining long term stability within the region (Cossa 2000). America’s role in steering the direction of the trilateral group became more important than ever.

Eventually, domestic factors strained the trilateral consensus on DPRK, for example the “Sunshine Policy” of South Korea which focused on greater engagement with North Korea. In the face of limited reciprocity by Pyongyang, this move by Seoul risked exacerbating the task of managing relations with US and Japan (Levin and Han 2002). As the threat from Pyongyang increased, the rationale for greater defense cooperation and reassessing strategies crystallised at various levels. The Bush administration decided to:

*“...undertake serious discussions with North Korea on a broad agenda to include: improved implementation of the Agreed Framework relating to North Korea's nuclear activities; verifiable constraints on North Korea's missile programs and a ban on its missile exports; and a less threatening conventional military posture.”* (The White House 1999)

The Bush administration opted for the multilateral approach to counter North Korea’s growing nuclear ambitions. In 2003, the Six Party Talks officially commenced, involving the US, North Korea, South Korea, Japan, China and Russia, as it focused on the objective of “complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear programs....(including) plutonium and uranium enrichment-based programs” (US Department of State 2005). This forum not only replaced TCOG but also witnessed China in a proactive diplomatic role. However, throughout the 2000s, the Bush administration led the dynamism for cooperation as tackling multi-layered threats from terrorism took top priority. As America focused on proactively engaging with global threats and welcomed greater participation of troops stationed

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in various parts of the world, the need for the two important Asian allies to deeply engage in these plans became evident. Within this context, the trilateral cooperation gained attention from the US due to Japan and South Korea's critical defense role in addressing a plausible crisis emanating from North Korea's recurring missile tests. Even though Japan and South Korea faced domestic challenges in their bilateral relations stemming from conflicting historical narratives, the comfort women issue and territorial disputes (Dokdo/Takeshima islands), the two countries were able to sustain regular bilateral defense cooperation. The American push for closer defense coordination led to a working level trilateral interaction. The three countries began Defense Trilateral Talks in 2008 which involved defense representatives of all the three countries, though at the time these meetings were off radar (Sneider et al 2016).

This decade was also the time when the US began to keep a watchful eye on China's rise. However, unlike the North Korean issue, there was a difference of opinion between the three countries. Throughout the 2000s, even as Japan-China relations were plagued with issues related to historical injustice and territorial disputes (Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands), deeper economic ties with Beijing and revolving door politics obstructed Tokyo from undertaking a stern stance towards China. Whereas, South Korea was hesitant to use its alliance with US to balance China with the fear of being stuck between two powerful states (Sneider et al 2016).

Reducing the focus of US foreign policy on the Middle East region and shifting its attention towards the Asia Pacific, the Obama administration launched the "pivot" (later rebalancing) to Asia that aimed at devoting greater US resources and attention. Viewing the region as the "key driver of global politics", the administration focused on investing in the region- diplomatically, economically and strategically (Clinton 2011). During this time, the focus of the trilateral relationship began widening beyond North Korea. The 2010 Trilateral statement included issues like climate change, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), maritime security, freedom of navigation and increasing trilateral coordination (US Department of State 2010). However, even as the triad formed consensus on security matters, Japan-South Korea relations reached new lows during the decade of 2010s. The impact of these bilateral disagreements was felt by the triad.

The August 2011 ruling, by a South Korean constitutional court that the nation needs to do more to settle disputes on behalf of comfort women, challenged Japan's official position that

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all these issues were addressed under the 1965 Treaty of Basic Relations (Yonhap News Agency 2011). During Japan's rule over Korean peninsula, thousands of Korean women were forced into sexual slavery by the Imperial Japanese government. Survivors and civic groups have recurrently protested against the Japanese government for the lack of resolution of past war crimes. This issue remains sensitive to date as it deals with collective identity, collective memory, and colonial experiences. The 2011 verdict led to pressure by public and judiciary on South Korea and Japan, creating a complex diplomatic challenge for bilateral relations. In 2012, as Shinzo Abe and Park Geun-hye were respectively elected as Japan and South Korea's heads of governments, political disagreements over the issues of history worsened. Japan's colonial aggressions in South Korea and China have always been a delicate subject even though their relations with Tokyo normalised in 1965 and 1972, respectively. PM Abe entered office with the intention of rewriting Japan's pacifist constitution and rebuilding Japan, militarily and economically. The Prime Minister's visits to Yasukuni Shrine which was established to honour Japanese soldiers who died in World War II (including convicted war criminals) became a constant bone of contention between Japan and its East Asian neighbours.

In 2013, PM Abe made a statement in the Japanese parliament that:

*“The definition of what constitutes aggression has yet to be established in academia or in the international community...Things that happened between nations will look differently depending on which side you view them from.”* (McCurry 2013)

Such statements not only added to the worries of a resurgence of Japanese nationalism, but were also viewed to be insensitive by the public in South Korea (Bong 2015). On the other hand, in the quest to strengthen her domestic foothold, President Park Geun-hye held an anti-Japan stance throughout her term and refused to hold a formal summit with her Japanese counterpart (Moon and Won). The president believed that there was little impetus for holding summits unless Japan did not apologize for its war time “wrong doings” (Williamson 2013). Eventually, during the 2014 Nuclear Security Conference in Hague, the three countries were able to hold a meeting due to American intervention (The White House 2014), the first such talk between PM Abe and President Park. President Obama was successful in maintaining this momentum as they signed the Trilateral Information Sharing Arrangement the same year that created an avenue for authorities from the three countries to share classified information,

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especially on missile and nuclear activities of Pyongyang (US Department of State 2014). The next year as well, ministers from the three countries met for two-day security talks and recommitted to working level consultations for intelligence sharing (US Department of State 2015).

In a bid to repair the strained relations, Tokyo and Seoul came to an understanding on the comfort women issue in December 2015. The Japanese government expressed:

*“...sincere apologies and remorse to all the women who underwent immeasurable and painful experiences and suffered incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women.”*  
(Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015)

The government also decided to pay \$8.3 million to South Korea as a way to fund the victims (BBC 2015). The Obama administration had placed pressure on both the countries to resolve the comfort women issue through diplomatic channels and hence was pleased when a consensus was reached (Moon and Won 2017). However, domestically President Park Geun-hye faced a storm of criticisms as public believed that the accord was flawed and lacked sincerity (Kim 2015). Furthermore, as President Park was embroiled in a corruption scandal and the public continued to stage protests<sup>1</sup>, the bilateral ties failed to recover. The lack of political will in South Korea to improve ties with Japan after the accord was signed, and public disapproval of the accord, was viewed as a breach of trust, eventually leading to Japan cancelling talks with South Korea on currency swap in January 2017 (Reuters 2015).

### **The Indo Pacific Strategy and Diverging Opinions**

In comparison to Hillary Clinton, President Donald Trump’s experience or vision for US foreign policy was not only limited but also guided by the domestic motto of “America First”. In the early months of his presidency, US foreign policy was reactionary in its approach and focused on fulfilling campaign promises like quitting the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Paris Agreement, and the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP). Still, the president and

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<sup>1</sup> In 2017 when the second Statue of Peace representing the victims was installed by civic groups in front of the Japanese consulate in Bussan, it led to Japan recalling top two Korean diplomats. The first statue was installed in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul in 2011 and since then has created rifts in the relationship.

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his team of experts had zeroed in on two threats that faced America- China and North Korea. Economically, Trump considered China as the greatest US threat that had become a powerhouse at the expense of American industries. Furthermore, a possible Chinese order that would utilise its economic and military assets to displace the US-led order was seriously considered by the administration (US National Security Strategy 2017). At the same time, North Korea's growing nuclear ambitions and its missile capabilities of targeting American cities was viewed as a plausible concern. However, at the same time, the Trump administration lacked a cohesive overarching strategy that could incorporate these specific national security and foreign policy agendas.

Out of the many US allies, Japan was the most proactive in fostering a personal relationship with President Trump. Prime Minister Abe was the first foreign counterpart that met the President elect in 2016 to build confidence, before he took the oath in January 2017 (Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017). These interactions helped in softening Trump's critical stance on issues like Japan free riding the security alliance and unfair trade practices over the course of his presidency. Most importantly, PM Abe was successful in gaining Trump's support for the Indo-Pacific strategy that had been his brainchild since the "confluence of two seas" speech in 2007 (Fodale 2020 & Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2007). During President Trump's 2017 trip to Vietnam, he stated:

*"...vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), a place where sovereign and independent nations, with diverse cultures and many different dreams, can all prosper side-by-side, and thrive in freedom and in peace"* (US Embassy & Consulate in Vietnam 2017)

FOIP became the missing strategy needed by the Trump administration to execute their plans which were not only in sync with their goal of countering China's growing influence but also being more effective than its predecessor's Pivot/Rebalancing Asia strategy. Understandably, Japan's reaction to FOIP was positive and welcomed by Tokyo. As relations with China continued to sour over the Senkaku/Diaoyu island dispute with increased maritime presence of the former in Sea of Japan, apart from consistent nuclear tests of North Korea (2016-2017), Japan saw FOIP as a moment to strengthen the alliance with US. The two leaders met and cemented their understanding on FOIP particularly in three areas: 1) establishing values of rule of law and freedom of navigation; 2) pursuing economic prosperity by improving regional

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connectivity; and, 3) committing towards peace & building maritime law enforcement (Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017). Furthermore, as an important strategic facet to the FOIP strategy, America, Australia, Japan and India renewed the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or Quad 2.0 in 2017 to “form a (security) diamond to safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the western Pacific” (Abe). For America, FOIP’s success deeply depended on the resilience of its alliance network. Some of the aims laid out by the Trump administration were: to strengthen capabilities and will of Quad countries & South Korea; create a quadrilateral security framework in the region with US, Japan, Australia & India as hubs; encourage South Korea to play bigger role in the region beyond the Korean peninsula; and, empower Japan to become a pillar of the Indo-Pacific security architecture (The White House 2017).

However, South Korea had reacted in a reserved manner to FOIP. The Moon Jae-in administration prioritised North Korea and found FOIP detrimental to inter-Korea relations (Kang 2021). Also, Seoul preferred to have greater autonomy in drafting its policies on China, South Korea’s largest trading partner (Kang 2021). FOIP shared many tenets with President Moon Jae-in’s New Southern Policy (NSP). Announced in 2017, NSP aimed to bolster South Korea’s ties with ASEAN and India based on the 3P’s (people, prosperity and peace) which were later upgraded to New Southern Policy Plus addressing the “changes in regional and global environment” (South Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs ). Irrespective of the similarities, the Indo Pacific Strategy’s security outlook was in contrast to NSP which was more focused on trade and economics. In the wake of China’s economic coercion as a response to Seoul’s participation in US’ Terminal High Altitude Area Defense Missile Program (THAAD) in 2016, NSP represented a geostrategic and geo-economic shift in South Korean foreign policy as it tried to hedge ties with US and China (Lim 2019 & Seo 2021). Furthermore, some analysts viewed the Indo Pacific Strategy’s Japanese roots as being one of the reasons that prevented Seoul’s early participation (Yeo 2020). As Japan intensified its association with US, South Korea recognised the vulnerabilities that could follow by being involved in a US-China competition (Yeo and Koga, Pacific Forum 2021). Ultimately, with the risk of being isolated in the region, South Korea cautiously decided to work with the US and strengthen compatible factors of FOIP and NSP. With the goal of creating synergy between the two policies that focused on transparency, inclusiveness and openness, South Korea and United



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States vowed to cooperate on a wider range of issues (South Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

As US-Japan and US-South Korea relations progressed at differing pace, Japan-South Korea relations hit a new low. This time, the issue of historical grievances and conflict over narratives not only created a diplomatic challenge but also spilled over in trade and security relations of the two countries. In 2018, a court in Seoul passed an order stating that Nippon Steel Corporation and Sumitomo Metal Corp (5401.T) should compensate four surviving South Koreans for forced labour during Japanese rule over the Korean peninsula (Shin 2019). Japan, in response, removed Seoul as a preferred trade partner from the white list, the only Asian country on the list (Pham 2019). South Korea accused Japan of initiating a trade war with President Moon Jae-in citing that, “if Japan, even though it has great economic strength, attempts to harm our economy the Korean Government also has countermeasures with which to respond” (Pham 2019). South Korea removed Japan from the list of trusted trade partners furthering the trade row (Seung 2019). In December 2018, Japan accused ROK navy destroyer of allegedly locking its target radar on a Japanese P-1 surveillance plane. Japan called this incident as “extremely dangerous that could cause an unexpected situation” (Kajimoto and Shin 2019). In January 2019, South Korea accused Japan of conducting a flight which was at a low altitude over its naval vessels and called it a “provocative act” (VOA News 2013). The same year South Korea voiced its desire to withdraw from the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan, a crucial intelligence sharing pact and further deepened the wedge between Seoul and Tokyo. Japan protested and accused South Korea of letting trade disputes impact security relations (Shin and Takenaka 2019). GSOMIA has been a major symbol of the US-Japan-South Korea trilateral defense cooperation amidst growing Chinese aggression and North Korea’s escalating nuclear impulses. Due to heavy American pressure, South Korea decided to save the GSOMIA with Japan, at the eleventh hour before the agreement was due to expire (Yoshida and Sugiyama 2019 & Hyung 2019).

Since 2018, the understanding that demarcated converging aspects of Japan-South Korea bilateral relations from historical disagreements was deeply compromised. Domestic politics and downward spiralling of public opinion has played a role in the erosion of this understanding, unlike seen in the history of the relations since normalisation. Anti-Japan sentiments in South Korea become an important source of nationalism, pivotal for electoral

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politics, and President Moon Jae-in incorporating this in his domestic agenda not only impacted Japan-South Korea relations but also the triad (Schoff and Lee 2019). Furthermore, even as FOIP aimed to create a better geo-strategic environment for strengthening the alliance, President Trump's failure to recognise certain key threat perceptions of the two Asian countries also hampered trilateral cooperation. For example, President Trump playing down North Korea's short range missile tests and only considering long range ballistic missiles as the reigning source of the North Korean threat presented a cause for concern and a looming perception gap between Washington DC and its Asian allies (Browne 2019). Also, even though PM Abe tried to utilize diplomacy to gain heightened agreement with President Trump, Japan was continuously side-lined whenever the Japanese abduction issue was brought up during Trump-Kim meetings signalling the limits of US-Japan bonhomie (Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017).

### **Renewing the Trilateral Alliance & Forging Possibilities**

President Joe Biden entered office with the intent to rectify American missteps during the Trump era, even though the administration decided to continue the Indo Pacific Strategy (IPS), albeit with some changes. Firstly, the officials polished the language of their message to the region that was not solely focused on likeminded countries, as some viewed the Quad as an exclusionary (democratic) grouping (Grossman 2021). The willingness to cooperate with allies and partners was reiterated. Also, recognising flaws of American democracy helped in creating an inclusive Indo-Pacific narrative (US Department of Defense 2021). Secondly, the Biden administration reduced IPS' attention to partnering with likeminded countries to counter China, but rather addressed the pressing threats faced by countries in the region. One of the first visits made by the top officials of the administration was to Japan and South Korea as a way to mend diplomatic bridges, re-instilling faith of allies in their alliance with US, and reinvigorating the trilateral cooperation. Secretary of State, Anthony J Blinken, and Secretary of Defense, Lloyd J Austin, participated in US-Japan Security Consultative Committee (2+2) and US-ROK Foreign & Defense Ministerial (2+2) talks with the Indo-Pacific region as an important point of discussion (US Department of State 2022). Thirdly, building on the collective abilities of allies and partners while focusing on shaping the regional architecture became a bigger agenda than solely focusing on China (Phua 2022). The administration was able to gauge the regional anxiety of countries like South Korea and ASEAN over the binary policy options for them as a result of US-China competition. The administration paid particular attention to rectifying its

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past rhetoric by stating that the “Indo Pacific is not against one country or designed to make choose (anyone) countries”, aimed at dousing regional suspicion about IPS (The White House 2022). And lastly, Biden elevated the strategic position of trilateral alliance within the IPS and committed to:

*“...cooperate closely through trilateral channel on DPRK...we will also work together on regional development and infrastructure, critical technology and supply chain issues and women’s leadership & empowerment. Increasingly, we will seek to coordinate our regional strategies in a trilateral context”* (The White House 2022)

Since the early months of the presidency, mending relations between Tokyo and Seoul became one of the top foreign policy priorities for the Biden administration. When President Moon Jae-in met President Biden in 2021, the joint statement voiced the:

*“...importance of ROK-US-Japan trilateral cooperation for responding to DPRK’s challenges, protecting shared security and prosperity, upholding common values, and bolstering the rules based international order”* (The White House 2021)

According to experts, the mention of the trilateral relationship in the joint statement was unusually long, signalling America’s backhanded pressure on Seoul and Tokyo to resolve their bilateral matters in a way that does not impact the triad (Glosserman 2021). Moreover, the change of leadership in Japan and South Korea created a hope for better bilateral relations. In comparison to Shinzo Abe’s hard-line approach, the new Japanese PM, Fumio Kishida, held a moderate ideology even though the party (LDP) he belongs to remains right wing (Harris 2021). At the same time, South Korea’s new conservative President, Yoon Suk-yeol, entered office advocating for a “future oriented approach towards South Korea-Japan bilateral relations,” a vast difference from his moderate predecessor (The Mainichi 2022). After symbolically inviting the Japanese foreign minister to his inauguration ceremony with the desire to reset the relations, the two:

*“...shared a view that bilateral and trilateral strategic collaboration also involving the United States is needed more than ever in the current international situation where the rules-based*

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*international order is being threatened, and they have no time to spare in improving Japan-South Korea relations” (Kyodo News 2022)*

These developments helped in creating a favourable diplomatic environment for President Biden’s maiden trip to South Korea and Japan in May 2022. President Yoon Suk-yeol’s pro-US stance and intention to deepen ties with likeminded countries in the Indo-Pacific further helped in making the visit a success. South Korea’s intention to “positively review” any invitation to join the Quad and considering participation in the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) as “obvious” are some significant shifts undergoing in the Korean policy towards the Indo Pacific strategy (The Korea Times 2022 & Yonhap News Agency 2022). During Biden’s visit to Japan, the two countries reiterated their joint commitment towards FOIP with Tokyo showcasing interest for joining the IPEF. The trip was also important as US succeeded in gaining Japanese commitment to a “substantial increase” in their defense budget, a step to make the alliance more equitable (The Mainichi 2022).

Within the context of Russia waging war in Ukraine, China’s increased grey zone maritime activities in the East China Sea, and reports of North Korean plans for testing its seventh nuclear weapon, the need for boosting ties between trans-Atlantic and Asian partners was realised by US and NATO countries. In a rare move, South Korea, Japan, Australia and New Zealand, or the Asia Pacific Partners 4 (AP4), were invited to attend the 2022 NATO summit in Madrid (The Japan Times 2022). Recognizing the importance of the Indo-Pacific region for global affairs amidst intensified strategic competition between US, China and Russia, this invitation was beyond the optics of messaging. NATO-AP4 meeting focused on the Ukraine war and strengthening ties between the Indo-Pacific and NATO with an understanding that their “security is indivisible” (Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2022). This meeting was also an opportunity for Japan and South Korea to gather greater European support in tackling the North Korean threat.

Parallel to the NATO gathering, US-Japan-South Korea held trilateral talks for the first time since 2017. With an eye to deepen the security relationship, the leaders acknowledged that the “deterrence capabilities of the US-Japan and US-South Korea alliances need to be upgraded as part of the essential effort to strengthen the trilateral partnership” (The Japan Times 2022). President Biden highlighted the significance of the trilateral cooperation for achieving the

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“shared objective of denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and free and open Indo Pacific” (Tanaka 2022). Beefing up the deterrence ability of the trilateral alliance amid the shifting geopolitics of the region was the larger takeaway of the meeting.

### **Conclusion**

The trilateral alliance has been a product of navigating disagreements and building the logic for cooperation over the years as the regional security landscape evolved. In many ways, the US-Japan-South Korea trilateral alliance became a reality when US-Japan and US-South Korea defense relations managed to develop common security perceptions. The alliance came to life in the years after the Cold War era with the need to respond to regional threats, particularly North Korea’s nuclear ambitions. For the US, since the Korean War, forging closer ties with Japan and South Korea has been a foreign policy goal vis-à-vis strategic pursuits in Asia. American security commitments to the region are interlinked to Japan and South Korea, not only from a conceptual standpoint, but also on an operational level (Sneider 2016). During the Cold War years, America saw the issues embedded in the historical relationship of Japan and South Korea as a hurdle for greater security cooperation. With the hope that these bilateral differences would be sorted out over the years, America avoided intervening and being pressurised to side with either of the allies. However, Washington realised that addressing these matters is critical for the better functioning of the triad. But as these wartime issues flared and the political will to resolve them weakened, America’s role as a hesitant mediator became more imperative than ever. The American diplomatic nudge for resolving these issues, and occasionally steering the triad towards their shared security understanding, have helped in the sustenance of the trilateral. Furthermore, as the scope of the triad expanded beyond North Korea, it has been viewed as a critical framework within the US Indo-Pacific strategy.

For Japan and South Korea, their security interests have overlapped much more than that with United States, and yet there persists a lingering mistrust in the relationship. North Korea remains their top threat, particularly North Korea’s short range missile abilities which were downplayed by the Trump administration over the threat of long-range missiles and nuclear tests. On China, the two countries have differing approaches as Tokyo considers Beijing’s emboldened maritime activities as a matter of serious national threat, whereas Seoul has struggled to mould a policy that is immune to the great power politics. As domestic politics continue to leverage historical animosity for building the tenets of nationalism, and widening

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public perceptions of each other, rebuilding the trust within the Japan-South Korea relation remains a challenge for the trilateral alliance. Japan has made a clear distinction between security and history issues but has time and again been surprised by Seoul's difficulty to do the same. For South Korea, the wartime issues remain integral to their socio-political history that encompasses larger debates on national identity and represents collective national desire for war crimes resolution. Hence, insightful political leadership by the two countries, that could balance these matters while upholding core security agreements, would be critical for the ongoing momentum within the triad. At the same time, there remains wide areas of convergence for the two countries apart from the North Korea threat like interest at maintaining a rules-based order, strengthening democratic resilience in the region, finding the means to bolster regional infrastructure, and freedom of navigation. Importantly, the Biden administration's decision to rebuild the Indo-Pacific strategy beyond the China narrative and adopting an inclusive discourse has helped in making FOIP palatable for countries like South Korea.

Irrespective of the difference of opinion regarding FOIP, the multilateral facet of the concept furthers the objective of the triad. As the three countries continue to forge the fate of the trilateral, this era marks a test for the resilience of the US alliance network in the region.

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